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OR,

The Marauder of the Mimbres.

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JACK," "OLD PLUG UGLY, THE ROUGH AND
READY," "OLD DISMAL," "HUSTLER
HARRY," "COLONEL COOL,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

COWBOY VS. CAVALRYMAN.

SILVER CITY was excited. The Apaches were on the war-path and, with Geronimo as their leader, had been committing depredations seventy-five miles to the west, just over the line into Arizona. A hundred wild rumors were afloat, but the most alarming of all was that the red chief had threatened to visit Silver and had already crossed the line into New Mexico.

"He'll never dare come here," declared more than one; but there were others who shook their heads, saying:

FOR A MOMENT DARING OLD TRUE HUNG MOTIONLESS ON THE SWAYING LADDER.

"Geronimo will dare anything. If he has threatened to come, he will keep his word."

And the very ones who asserted that the dreaded Apache would not come were foremost in arming themselves and preparing for the possible. Weapons were seen on every hand, and ammunition was in demand.

It was a motley assembly of human beings that gathered in Silver. There were citizens, cowboys, miners, Mexicans—people gathered from all quarters of the globe. The languages of many nations could be heard on the streets. Men were hurrying here and there, horsemen were galloping up and down, knots of excited individuals were gathered at different points, excitedly discussing the stories of the latest outrages.

Every hour seemed to bring some fresh tale of the doings of the detested and dreaded redmen. People came hurrying in from the country to seek the protection of the town, and each new arrival had a fresh tale to add fuel to the flames of alarm and fury.

Davidson's ranch, eighty miles to the northwest, had been plundered and destroyed, only three cowboys succeeding in escaping. The people of Richmond were deserting their homes and flying toward Silver City. A family had been murdered on the Mimbres Trail. There had been an encounter between a squad of troops from Fort Bayard and the savages, and soldiers were defeated.

In fact, so many stories were current a person knew not what to believe or think, and it was safe to designate two-thirds of them as the inventions of the imaginative brains of individuals who loved the excitement and wished to keep it up. Had Geronimo perpetrated as many outrages as were attributed to him he must have been more than human and possessed the power of being in many different places at one and the same time.

All the stories were not fabrications, but even then the crafty and brutal chieftain of the Apaches did not have a hand in all the depredations perpetrated. Now and then Red Hand was spoken of as the possible author of some murder and robbery.

Who was Red Hand?

A mysterious marauder whose home lay somewhere in the heart of the Mimbres Mountains, whose barren peaks could be seen from Silver City and whose wild recesses had never been fully explored. It was said that gold was hidden in those great hills, but the desert passes rarely echoed to the footsteps of the prospector. A cloud of mystery and awe hung over the whole wild region.

Red Hand rarely troubled the people of Silver; he was too cunning for that. It was the outlying ranches and smaller camps that suffered, and many times his expeditions extended into Arizona or Texas. Often he pushed far south into Old Mexico, but he was careful not to arouse that country too hotly against him, as he disposed of much of his stolen booty there. After raiding the Rio Grande ranches it was not a difficult thing to run the cattle into Mexico and defeat pursuit at the border line.

Red Hand's followers were nearly all as daring and brutal as himself—the most of them being ruffians of the most desperate class. Nearly half of them were Mexicans or half-blood Spaniards.

More than once had the Marauder been hotly pursued by bands of men organized for the purpose of hunting him down, but he always had succeeded in escaping. Once a squadron of cavalry had pursued him to the Mexican line, and then, although he had been forced to abandon his plunder, he had escaped, laughing defiance in their faces.

It was not strange that many of the robberies and murders seemed more like the work of the Red Hand than of Indians; but the people stood in greater fear of Geronimo than of the Marauder of the Mimbres. However, it was reported that the outlaw had offered the Apache chief his aid in making a raid on Silver, against which place the former held an unaccountable hatred. The story was laughed to scorn by those most conversant with the ways of the Marauder.

"Red Han' don't hitch with 'Paches wu'th shucks," asserted a grizzled veteran. "Thar hain't no love lost 'tween him an' Heronimo, an' ther ole red sarnip hates him wuss'n p'ison. Thar hain't no danger o' them two hitchin' teams—now you heur me shout! Keep yer clo'se on, sez I."

The sudden appearance in Silver of a squadron of cavalry created no little excitement. The troopers were in command of a young and self-important lieutenant, a West Point graduate, who seemed to consider himself a Solomon in wisdom and dignity, and apparently believed that he could give points to Crook or Miles, and not half try.

Down the crowded street rode the Blue Coats, turning out for no one. From their manner one would have thought they owned the town, and scorned its denizens.

Now the average cowboy holds Uncle Sam's "Johnnies" in the utmost contempt, and it is a well-known fact that the "sojer boys" have nothing but derision for the cow-punchers. As

there were many cowboys in Silver, it was not strange the troopers were greeted in anything but a pleasant manner.

"Looker ther dandies!" shouted one half-intoxicated "citizen," following the words with a coarse "haw-haw" of derision.

"See thet monkey-sprig ter ther fore!"

"Thet's Cap'n Stiff-neck."

"Tbem's Uncle Sam's pensioners after him."

"Ther kentry s'ports 'em ter dodge Injuns."

"Paupers in uniform!"

The cries became more frequent and annoying as the squad advanced, and the face of the young lieutenant grew hot with the rage he felt. Still he turned his head neither to the right nor left, and the soldiers seemed utterly unconscious of the taunts hurled at them, although there was not a man among them who was not boiling with anger.

To the right and left the people moved to give way for the troopers. Among others who fell aside were two young and dashing appearing cowboys, who were laughing heartily. In truth, they were not laughing at the soldiers, but the lieutenant fancied they were, and his rage suddenly gained control of his judgment. With deliberate intent, he swerved aside and rode straight toward the two cowboys.

"It looks as if he is going to run us down, Hal," muttered the one who wore a blonde mustache and had curling yellow hair.

The dark eyes of his companion flashed, and the light of laughter suddenly died out of his face. Without a word he waited.

Almost against the cowboy rode the officer.

"Move aside, there!" he commanded.

The cowboy of the black mustache did not stir.

"Do you own the whole of this street?" he calmly inquired.

"Move aside!" shouted the lieutenant, his face growing still blacker. "Make room for us to pass!"

"How much room do you need? Two-thirds of the street is clear."

"Will you move?"

"No!"

The young officer's hands fell on his saber, and the next moment the bright blade flashed in the sunlight.

"Move!" he cried, fairly atremble with rage. "Move or take the consequences!"

In the twinkling of an eye he was covered by a cocked revolver held in the young cowboy's hand.

"Nary move, pard!" fell from the lips of the dark-eyed cattleman. "We gave you plenty of road, and you turned aside for the express purpose of forcing us to give you more; but, just now you are barking up the wrong tree. You are certain to have heaps of fun before you get us to move again."

"That's straight talk from the lips of Hurricane Hal," put in the light-complexioned cowboy. "When you try to crowd that boy, you have tackled the large job. I am Maverick Mat, his pard, and I will stand by him till the Pacific freezes over! If you are looking for fun, come and see us, Mister Shoulder-strap!"

By this time other cowboys were flocking toward the point of meeting, and it looked as if there would be trouble between the soldiers and the cattlemen. Weapons were freely displayed by the latter, nearly all of whom had been drinking, and muttered threats were heard on every hand. Peaceful citizens drew aside from the point of danger.

"If you refuse us the road, we will ride you down!" angrily declared the lieutenant.

"Now I am not much of a sport," half-smiled the one designated as Hurricane Hal, "but I will bet you two to one you don't ride us down. If you try it, you will find it mighty rocky riding."

"This is an outrage!"

"On your part it is an outrage on good-nature, that is a fact."

"You shall pay for this!"

"I am afraid you will not be able to collect the face of the bill."

The angry officer looked around and saw the cowboys flocking toward that point, many of them with revolvers in hand, and he realized his little squad was outnumbered more than two to one. Under the circumstances, it would be anything but advisable to force an encounter.

With reluctance and chagrin he thrust his saber back into its sheath.

"I will not forget this insult!" he declared, savagely, glaring at Hurricane Hal. "A Cranston never forgets!"

The dark-eyed cowboy bowed, something like a smile giving his lips a curl.

Then the lieutenant swerved aside and led his men onward, amid the laughter and jeers of the other cowboys who had witnessed the encounter.

CHAPTER II.

OLD TRUE BLUE INTERFERES.

BOTH Hurricane Hal and Maverick Mat were rather handsome young fellows, despite the fact that their faces and hands were browned by exposure to all kinds of weather and that they wore the cowboy attire of the Southwest—a

dress made for service not for beauty. Broad sombreros shaded their faces and weapons peeped from the holsters at their waists. Their clothes were of plain woolen stuff, and deerhide leggings rose above their long-legged and high-heeled boots.

Both bestrode splendid horses, Hurricane Hal's being coal-black in color, while Maverick Mat's animal was a roan.

The other cowboys gathered around the two pards and seemed eager to discuss the encounter with the soldiers, but Hal became suddenly reticent, and a motion from him caused his comrade to remark:

"It is of no consequence, pards. The Johnnies tackled the wrong crowd, that is all."

Which reminder caused a loud laugh, and the pards rode away.

Among the witnesses of the "affront" were two men of very dissimilar aspect, although both were homely old fellows. One was tall and lank, with a beardless face and a twinkling blue eye. A look of whimsical good-nature was almost constantly on his countenance, and it was plain he looked on life as a rollicking comedy gotten up for his express benefit. For all of this, he was not a person to "laugh and grow fat."

"Larf," he sometimes said, speaking with a broad Yankee drawl—"why, I larf so 'tarnal much I shaik ther fat all off my ole ribs! I can't git on no fat an' keep it, nohow!"

This odd old fellow was dressed in smoked buckskin, wide-brimmed hat and heavy, brass-spurred boots. Around his waist was a belt that supported a wonderful assortment of weapons, and in his hands he carried a Winchester of the finest pattern.

His companion was clad in much the same style. He was short in physique, and somewhat stoop-shouldered. An iron-gray beard covered his face, and his dark eyes were keen and piercing. His nose was hooked like the beak of a hawk, and his general aspect was that of one who had seen much of the rough side of life.

The first was Truman Ballou, a hunter, trapper, scout and miner, familiarly known as Old True Blue.

The other was Zeb Horn, a veteran miner who had made three fortunes and lost them all.

"He! he!" laughed Zeb, as the soldiers passed on. "I dunno's I've got ary bit o' love fer ther cow-punchers, but thet young squid o' an ossifer wuz in ther wrong an' I'm glad ter see him git ther wust."

"I know him" declared Old True Blue.

"Ye do?"

"Yaas; it was him an' his sojers that kept Ike Miller's gang from hangin' me fer a hoss-thief. By gosh! I hain't forgot that, if ther leftenant is a leetle hort-headed an' foolish."

"Them's two slick-lookin' cow-punchers."

"Yaas; they be abaout as old as my Jack would have bin if he had lived, pore boy!"

As the cowboys turned away, the two old fellows fell to talking of the Indian outbreak.

"I don't see haow you kin be away frum yer wife an' that gal," asserted Old True. "Ther red skunks may butcher em' before ye git back hum."

"I don't reckon thar's much danger o' that," was Zeb's assurance. "Ther reds hain't up in thet deerection, an' they w'u'dn't be ap' ter fine Eden Pocket ef they wur. All ther same, ef I hed knowed ther reds wur on ther rampage an' comin' this yar way, I sh'u'dn't lef' Betsey an' Kate all erlone. I don't reckon ther smokies'll move up thet way, but I shell hustle back right soon."

"That's right, Zeb; look arter ther wife an' leetle gal. By gosh! ole man, that's an angil, that gal of yours! By the 'tarnal! I can't understan' heow sech er hombly ole rip as yeou be kin be ther father of sech er harnsum gal—no, I can't!"

At this Zeb laughed good-humoredly.

"Wal, I 'low it wuz er happenstance, though Betsey wuz er powerful peert-lookin' gal. 'Twixt you an' me, True, ther ole lady hain't nohow bad-lookin' now."

To this the other readily agreed.

"You mus' come an' see us, ole pard," urged Zeb. "It's bin er y'ar sence you hev bin roun', an' ther gal has growed monst'rus in thet time. She's quite er young leddy now."

"She'll be havin' a feller purty soon," grinned the tall trapper.

At this Zeb's face fell and he soberly shook his head.

"Not yet," he demurred. "You know how we hev lived, True. Twicet hev I started ter send her ter school, but both times I've lost all I hed in ther worl' an' hev hed ter go ter diggin' erg'in. Kate hain't got no eddycashun but jest sech as her ole mom c'u'd giv her, an' thet warn't wu'th speakin' of. 'Fore she has ary feller she's got ter hev ther eddycashun she deserves. Pard, she's fit ter be er leddy, but, who'd want ter marry an ignerent gal like she is? Shorely not er gentleman. I hain't goin' ter hev her slavin' all her life like her mother hes afore her. Not much she sha'n't! Outside o' books, my Kate is ther ek'al o' ther best leddy in ther lan', an' w'en I strike it rich next time, I'm goin' ter make her ther ek'al anyway!"

Something like a look of pity swept across the face of Old True Blue.

"You may never strike it rich erg'in, Zeb," he said.

A desperate light filled the old fortune-hunter's eyes.

"Yes, I shell!" he cried. "I must! I must!"

"Waal, I hope ye will; but sech luck hain't often fer one man. Yeou have hed it three times, an' that's nigh onter ther limit."

"I hain't goin' ter give up at thet. But you mus' come an' see ther gal. You will, pard?"

"I reckon I'll creep roun' afore long, Zeb."

Finally the strangely-mated pair walked away together.

An hour later Old True entered one of the saloons of the town. He was alone, and almost the first person he noticed after passing through the doorway was Hurricane Hal. Glancing around, he saw Maverick Mat not far away.

The people within the saloon were drinking and discussing the Indian troubles.

A short time after Old True Blue entered the two young cowboys moved toward the door. As they were about to pass out, Lieutenant Cranston entered and jostled against Hal with deliberate intent.

In an instant the cowboy whirled on the quarrelsome young officer. Snatching his broad sombrero from his head, he dashed it into Cranston's face, crying:

"If you are set on a quarrel, you shall have it, you upstart!"

The lieutenant reeled back a step, his hand falling on the hilt of his saber, and for several moments the two glared into each other's eyes.

"Draw!" Hal finally cried, his hands free of weapons—"draw if you want to! If you do, I will stretch you cold before the blade clears its scabbard!"

The officer did not draw the weapon, although it may not have been the threat that prevented him from doing so.

"Will you tell me your name?" he coldly asked.

"Sure," was the prompt reply. "It is Hurricane Hal."

"I mean your correct name."

"Isn't that good enough?"

"Perhaps it is good enough for a man who does not dare own his true name."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said. But, I will bandy words with you no longer. You have offered me an insult, and you shall hear from me again. But for my position, I would call you to an account without loss of time."

"You are fortunate!" sneeringly spoken.

Lieutenant Cranston's face flushed again and, with a gesture of anger, he kicked the cowboy's sombrero from beneath his feet.

Like a flash Hurricane Hal leaped forward and tore the officer's cap from his head, dashing it to the floor.

"Tit for tat!" he cried, as he kicked it clean up against the ceiling above their heads.

That was too much for Cranston. With an exclamation of furious anger he leaped for the cowboy. The two men clinched, and in almost a twinkling, Cranston's heels went into the air and he landed on his back with a thud.

The trick had been performed so swiftly that not one of the spectators were able to tell just how it was accomplished.

With a laugh, Hurricane Hal picked up his hat just as the chagrined lieutenant scrambled to his feet.

Maverick Mat stood with his hands on his hips, placidly regarding all that passed, having the air of a person who believed his partner quite able to take care of himself.

The result of the brief struggle caused the cowboys within the room to utter a shout of delight.

"A fight! a fight!" was the cry, as the throng formed a circle.

Cowboy and soldier had fallen back and were glaring at each other, their hands touching deadly weapons.

"Fight it out with yer jukes!" yelled one.

"No cuttin' ner shootin'!" shouted another.

Old True Blue stepped between the two angry men.

"Thar hain't goin' ter be no kind of a fight!" he declared. "It's all gosh-blamed foolishness, an' I 'low both of you fellers is kinder in ther wrong. I know yeou, lieutenant, an' yeou don't want ter git inter no raow an' disgrace yerself. T'other feller's er likely-lookin' chap, an' I dcn't callate he's in ther habit of mixin' in bar-room brawls. I tell ye yeou hain't goin' ter fight, an' I'll make peace heur if I have ter lick ye both. It's Ole True Blue that's spoutin' naow, an' whut he says he means, by gosh!"

"You are the very man I came in here to see," declared Cranston, seeming to suddenly cool down. "I am willing to let this matter drop for the present."

CHAPTER III.

SOFT FOOT'S WARNING.

At this moment wild cries were heard coming from the street. The sounds seemed to be those of rage, and there was something deadly in their import. Nearer and nearer approached the cries.

"Gosh all hemlock!" spluttered Old True Blue. "I callate thar must be some kind of a haow-de-dout thar. Wonder whut it is?"

For a time the quarrel between the soldier and cowboy was forgotten, and the throng within the saloon rushed for the street.

Old True Blue was among the first to reach the open air. He did not have to look far for the cause of the excitement.

A solitary red-skin was riding down the street, and he was followed and hemmed in by the howling mob.

Now it was not an uncommon thing for an Indian to appear in Silver in time of peace, and at such a time one would attract no more than a passing glance; but the ravages of the Apaches had aroused the inhabitants of the town against red-men in general, and the sight of an Indian calmly riding through the place filled them with fury.

"Shoot him!"

"Kill him!"

"Down with the red devil!"

A hundred cries went up from the furious mob, but the red-man seemed scarcely to notice them. With a calm indifference and disdain that was wonderful, he rode serenely on, turning his head neither to the right nor left.

Such a savage was seldom seen in Silver City. He was proportioned like an Apollo, being over six feet in height and of perfect mold. His features were strong and gave him an air of manliness and intelligence, while his eye was as clear and keen as that of a mountain eagle. He sat his horse—a beautiful animal—as if a part of the creature.

Unlike the dirty and degraded red-skin so often seen in the town of the white man, his person and his clothes were clean. He was dressed in soft-tanned buckskin, the breast of his hunting-shirt being handsomely embroidered with stained porcupine-quills. A fringe of fine fur ran around the borders of the garment. His leggings and moccasins were also adorned in a savage but picturesque manner. His long, black hair fell upon the back of his horse, and raven-hued plumes nodded above his head. He was well-armed with weapons of the latest and most approved pattern, and their polished mountings glistened in the sunlight.

Despite the cries of fury to be heard on every hand and the fear-inspiring aspect of the mob, the face of this uncommon red man was as placid as the unrippled bosom of a tiny lake. Only the light in his dark eyes betrayed that he heard and understood every demonstration.

Just as the crowd issued from the saloon the mob on the street closed in on the lone Indian and brought him to a halt. They were led by one of the worst bullies of the town, a man known as "Boss Brule, the Bruiser."

"Hole on thar, dern ye!" commanded the ruffian, lifting his right hand with a gesture of warning, his left containing a revolver. "Jest chain up, you condemned varmint of creation! Ef ye don't, we'll make er milk-skimmer of ye, fer we'll fill ye full of hoels!"

The Indian drew rein, a look of contempt passing over his face like a flash.

"What do you want?" he distinctly demanded, his English being almost perfect.

"Want?" shouted Boss Brule. "Haw! haw! haw! Pards, this critter wants ter know w'at we want! Haw! haw! haw!"

Some of the crowd laughed in derision, but there was little merriment in the sound. The greater part of the mob were scowling and fingering their weapons.

"Want?" repeated the bully. "Thet's w'at we're goin' ter ax you. W'at der you want?"

"Soft Foot has business in the town of the pale-faces, else he would not have come."

"Wal, I reckon you'll wish you hed stayed erway 'fore ye git out of Silver. We hain't got no use fer live Injuns; but we be in need of dog-fodder, an' ther purps seem ter like dead red-skins," and Brule grinned as if he believed he had uttered a very witty saying.

"Why should the pale-face molest Soft Foot?"

"Waugh! 'Cause ye are er derned smoke-skinned rhino! You hev gall fer come hyer w'en yer 'lations are murderin' wite people all 'round in ther kentry!"

"That is not true."

"D'yer mean ter say I lie?"

"Soft Foot is not an Apache; he is a Ute. The Utes are not on the war-path against the whites. Soft Foot is friendly."

"Thet won't go down! You are hyer as er spy! I reckon ole Heronimo don't keer er hoot whuther his red devils are 'Paches ur Utes so long as they help him murder er few more white men an' wimmen an' chillun. We hain't nary derned bit of love fer er dirty-skin of ary tribe, an' so I 'low we'll hev ter make er shinin' 'zample of you, eh, pards?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Shoot him!"

"String him up!"

"Wipe him out!"

Weapons were flourished, and it seemed as if the Indian would be dragged from his horse in another moment.

At this juncture two men pushed their way to the center of the throng.

They were Zeb Horn and Old True Blue.

"Hole on hyer, you critters!" cried the old fortune-hunter. "I know this red-skin, an' he's straight stuff."

"That's a fac', by gosh!" supported Old True. "I callate you folkses heur in Silver know me an' Zeb Horn, an' w'en we say that Soft Foot is all right that oughter settle it. This Injun is white if he has got a red skin, an' I'll stan' by him till ther caows come home!"

"It's ther Trusty!"

"Old True Blue!"

"Ef he backs ther red, thet settles it."

But, Boss Brule did not think so.

"Not by er derned sight it don't settle it!" he growled, scowling savagely at the two men who had dared to stand by the Indian. "We hain't goin' ter let no red skunk come in hyer an' git erway ter tell Heronimo how ther lan' lays."

"And that is right," agreed a suave voice, as a dark-appareled man pushed forward. "I am in favor of taking care of the red-skin in some way, and I am willing to confess I believe the best way is to hang him to the nearest tree. It is an old saying and a true one that 'the only good Indian is a dead one.' The reds are on the war-path, and we cannot afford to take any chances."

The speaker was a gambler known in Silver as Sleek Saul. He was about thirty years old, well-built, finely-dressed, but had a face that was cold as a block of ice. That he was naturally cool and self-possessed was apparent at a glance.

Like a flash Old True Blue turned on the card-sharp.

"Waal, by thutteration!" he drawled, inspecting Sleek Saul from head to feet. "Who'd 'a' thunk it!"

The gambler scarcely seemed to notice the old fellow, but he added:

"We must take care of this red shark, men of Silver!"

"Shark?" cried the Trusty, indignation in his voice. "Great gosh all hemlock! Tork about sharks, will ye! Holy smoke! W'en it comes ter sharks, one of *your* stripe is wuss then ten o'ery 'Paches! Feller duz know a 'Pache is his enemy, but a critter like yeou purtends ter be his friend tell ye suck him dry with yer dirty tricks, then ye throw him cold 'crost ther table whar ye hev ruined him! Shark! By goldin'! thet duz start my dander!"

Sleek Saul's hands dropped into the side-pockets of his coat and he faced the old man, speaking with a cold sneer:

"You talk too much with your mouth, old fellow; it is not healthy. The first thing you know you will find yourself chewing lead."

"Yeou think so, an' I know you hev me kivered frum yer pockets. If I tried ter pull a pop, you'd shoot instanter. Waal, yeou w'u'dn't no more'n twitch trigger 'fore Zeb Horn'd blow ther hull roof of yer cabeza off. He has abaout ther largest kind of a drop on ye."

"Gospil fac's, them be!" chuckled Zeb, shaking a revolver within two feet of Sleek Saul's head. "I hev ye kivered, an' I'll bore ye ef ye don't git yer han's outer yer pockets ter oncet! Pull 'em out, mister!"

Although it must have caused him an effort, the gambler promptly obeyed, a cold smile crossing his steel-set countenance.

"Two to one! Well, I will not forget you two gentlemen."

The majority of the crowd stood aloof, appearing to be passive spectators, many of them having put up their weapons when Zeb and Old True sided with the Indian.

Soft Foot's keen eyes saw all that transpired and his ears drank in every word. He seemed more like one of the passive spectators than the cause of the trouble, but for all that he was ready for whatever might follow, and it was certain he would not remain idle should there be a conflict.

But, there was to be no conflict.

At this moment Lieutenant Cranston and his followers appeared and rode into the thick of the crowd. Old True Blue instantly appealed to the young officer, and Cranston said:

"Your word is sufficient; if you say this Indian is all right, he shall have our protection."

Seeing the tide had turned, the gambler withdrew with as good grace as possible.

Not so Boss Brule.

"I'll lift ther top-knot of thet red skunk yit!" he snarled. "An' you two hombly ole runts, you'd best look out fer me! I'm er bad man w'en I'm r'iled, an' jest now I'm r'iled. I'll 'member ye, an' you'll heur frum me erg'in."

With this threat, he turned toward the saloon.

"W'at in blazes brought you hyer ter Silver at this time, Soft Foot?" asked Zeb. "You oughter knowed ther resk you'd run."

"I did know it," was the calm reply.

"Then why did ye come?"

"To warn you of danger."

"Danger ter who?"

"The squaws in the cabin."

"My wife an' leetle gal?"

"Yes."

The old fortune-hunter caught Soft Foot by the arm.

"W'at o' them?" he panted. "It can't be ther 'Paches am gittin' up thet thar way? W'at is it, Soft Foot? Speak out fer Heaven's sake!"

"It is not the red-men you have to fear."
 "Who, then?"
 "Bad pale-faces."
 "Ha!"
 "Red Hand has seen your child, and she is pleasing to his eyes. He would possess her."
 "That inhuman devil? How der you know this, Soft Foot?"
 "Soft Foot has ears."
 "Then you heard that critter say he wuz goin' ter steal my leetle Kate?"
 "Yes; he has planned to possess her before you return."
 A look of fury settled on Zeb's face, and he smote his clinched hands together as he cried:
 "If he touches that child, I will know no rest till I have his heart's blood!"
 "If you would save her, you must away at once," asserted the Ute.
 "I will go along with ye, Zeb," promptly announced Old True Blue.
 "But I have work for you, True," urged Lieutenant Cranston. "I have come here from the fort for the express purpose of finding and engaging you."
 "Waal, lieutenant, yeou have hed yer trouble fer northin' ef ther engaigment will interfere with me goin' long with Zeb."
 "I don't believe it will."
 "Whut do yeou want?"
 "I have instructions to secure you for a double service—to look out for the hostiles and see if you can find where the secret retreat of Red Hand lays. You are to report to the fort as often as possible, and your pay will be that of a special scout. Can we count on you?"
 The old man wasted but a single moment in thought, then he answered:
 "I guess yeou kin."

CHAPTER IV.

"FOUND AT LAST!"

HURRICANE HAL and Maverick Mat were witnesses of all that passed on the street, and they were about to side with Zeb Horn and Old True Blue when the soldiers appeared.

"That settles it," laughed Mat. "I don't reckon we need to chip in now."

Hal said nothing, but his comrade noticed his eyes were fastened on the face of the gambler, Sleek Saul, and they were fairly blazing.

"What is it, pard?" asked Mat, softly.
 At first Hal did not seem to notice the question, but when it was repeated, he started and fairly hissed:

"Found at last!"

Maverick Mat understood, and he asked:

"Is that the cuss?"

"That is the devil I am after!" was the savage answer. "Before another hour passes he or I will die!"

"I will stand by you, pard."

"I know you will, but all I ask is that you see fair play. Dastard though he is, I ask for no advantage over him. God will not permit him to escape my vengeance!"

Hurricane Hal was fearfully aroused, and it was with difficulty he gained control of his shaken nerves.

"You must cool down, pard," whispered Mat. "You will be no match for him in your present condition."

Hal was well aware of that, and he did his best to regain his composure, succeeding after a few moments.

"Are you steady?" asked the blonde cowboy.

For reply the right hand of the other was held out. It was as steady as a rock.

"Good enough! That fellow has a hard face, and I fancy he is a man of nerve. Look sharp he does not get the drop on you."

"He shall not."

When Sleek Saul withdrew and entered the saloon he was followed by the cowboy pards.

After one swift glance around the room, the gambler advanced toward a card-table and sat down, drawing a letter from his pocket with the evident intention of perusing it. He may have been surprised when Hurricane Hal had dropped into a seat on the opposite side of the table, but if he was, his face of ice did not betray him. He scarcely glanced at the young cattleman.

But Hal was there for business, and he did not allow a moment to run to waste.

"I believe I have seen you before, sir," he declared, speaking with forced calmness.

The gambler lifted his eyes again, and this time there was an inquiring light in them.

"So? Well, then you have the advantage over me."

"Is your memory as poor as that?"

"I assure you I have a very good memory for faces, but yours seems quite strange to me. It cannot be I took notice of you if we ever met before."

"You are mistaken."

"How?"

"You took great notice of me."

For a moment the card-sharp's brows were knit, but he firmly shook his head.

"You are slightly off your base, young fellow," he asserted. "It is plain you have mistaken me for some one else."

A steely glitter showed in Sleek Saul's eyes, but his cold face betrayed emotion of no kind.

"If you are right, you should know my name."

"I do."

"Ah?"

"It is *Rebal Raguel*!" and as he uttered these words, the young cowboy bent forward, his dark eyes fixed on the gambler's face. But if he expected a display of emotion of any kind, he was disappointed. Sleek Saul's face was quite immobile.

After a moment, a short laugh came from the gambler's lips.

"I felt sure you were mistaken, young fellow," he said; "now I know it."

"You deny you are Rebal Raguel?"

"Sure."

"Then, you lie!"

Still Sleek Saul's eyes alone betrayed any anger he may have felt. Hurricane Hal expected the card-sharp would reach for a weapon, and the cowboy was ready to defeat any such move, but the hands of the "Man of Ice," as Saul was sometimes called, did not fall below the level of the table.

"You are a very foolish and foolhardy youth," he said, with deliberation. "You are foolish to insist you know me, when it should be plain you do not; you are foolhardy to call me a liar, for you should know I have the reputation of being a bad man to r'ile."

"I care nothing for your reputation. That you are a bad man in one sense I know well enough; but for five years I have been on your trail, and at last I have run you down. The time has come for you to answer for your dastardly crime!"

"You talk like a maniac."

"But I mean every word I utter, Rebal Raguel."

"Who is this Rebal Raguel?"

"A dastard! a dog! an inhuman monster!"

"And I look like him?"

"You are the man!"

"I see it is useless to deny it."

"Then you confess?"

"Nothing of the kind. I simply refuse to waste my breath in idle talk. Still I have taken a sudden curiosity to know what crime this Raguel committed."

Hurricane Hal made a gesture of impatience and anger. Then, seeming to suddenly change his mind, he said:

"If you wish it so, we will suppose you know nothing of Rebal Raguel's acts. I will outline them in a few words. I never knew the whole black truth till I heard it from my dying mother's lips."

"To begin with, my mother was a handsome woman, but she did not have a very strong mind. I never saw my father, but from mother's lips I learned he was a very plain man—a New Englander. Mother was a country girl, and she knew little of the world when she was married. My father was a poor man, and he was seized by the gold fever within a year of his union with the belle of Piermont. He left her to make a fortune in the mines of California and return in a year or two. Six months after his departure I was born."

"My father's luck was not what his fancy had pictured, and the year or two slipped into six years, and still he was a poor man, lured on and on by the phantom of gold. He would not return till he had struck it rich and made his fortune. Not that he did not long to see his beautiful wife and child, but pride and poverty bound him to the mines. He wrote often to my mother."

"The two were destined never to look on each other's faces again. The serpent stole into my mother's life. A handsome stranger came to Piermont, and fortune threw them into each other's society. At first the stranger did not overstep the bounds of propriety, but he finally fell passionately in love with my mother, then he began his wooing."

"I must pass over these things as swiftly as possible, for they are not pleasant for a son to speak of. Let it be sufficient to say my mother learned to love the stranger, and in time he induced her to fly with him. I was taken along, for mother would not abandon me, although such was the desire of her destroyer."

"For twelve years my mother lived as the wife of the man who had led her to desert her home and friends for him. It was not a happy life they led, for the love of the man and woman was as different as light and darkness. As long as she kept her beauty and fascination, she could draw him back to her, no matter how bitterly they had quarreled; but when she began to fade, she saw him slipping from her grasp."

"For years it was a mystery how this man obtained a living and supported his 'family' in such luxury. Even my mother did not know the truth. We often moved from one place to another. At length the truth came out—he was not only a gambler—but a consort of criminals."

"During the last five years that this man lived with my mother I did not once see his face, for I was almost constantly away at school. When I was at 'home' he was not there. I saw my mother was fading—I saw she was unhappy—my heart was troubled. Still I was young, and I knew not the bitter truth at that time, for mother had told me my father was dead and she

was married to the man with whom she was living. Even then I hated him, although I knew not why."

"Finally I had a dispatch to come home at once. No money was sent, and I had barely enough to pay my car-fare. I went."

"I found my mother dying!"

For a moment Hurricane Hal paused, seeming overcome by the intensity of his feelings. He glared at the gambler as if he longed to fly at his throat. Sleek Saul seemed scarcely to notice the look, but as he nibbled the end of an unlighted cigar, he placidly observed:

"A very interesting and romantic tale; it would make excellent material for a sensational novel."

A grating sound came from the cowboy's teeth, and his hands were clinched. His black eyes blazed.

For some moments Hal was unable to proceed, but he finally gained control of himself sufficiently to go on.

"By the bedside of my dying mother I listened to her story. Then for the first time I learned the truth. She did not desert her husband of her own free will, but the man who lured her away exerted such an influence over her that she could not resist him. Although she knew it not, she really was hypnotized. Having taken the false step, she could not withdraw, and so she existed all those miserable years with him. It was a terrible thing to listen while she told how she had been eaten by remorse and despair. I held her cold hand and bowed my face beside her on the pillow while she poured the whole bitter tale into my ears."

"She had tried to keep her beauty, for she understood she would be deserted when she could fascinate her destroyer no longer; but little by little cruel fate had robbed her of her charms. All the time the man who had led her astray was growing colder and harsher. At length, he made no secret of the fact that she no longer held his affections—if I may call the emotions he had shown by that name. He taunted her with her faded beauty and he openly told her of his intrigues with other women. But for me, she would have taken her own life then, and thus escaped from her misery."

"At length they quarreled. Oh, the devil—the fiend! He struck her down—he kicked her! She lay moaning at his feet, begging for mercy! Then the spawn of Satan kicked her again and again!"

"Curse you, Rebal Raguel! your life shall pay for those blows! If there is a hell, you deserve the hottest corner!"

CHAPTER V.

SLEEK SAUL SLIPS AWAY.

THE cowboy's hand was on a weapon, but Sleek Saul made no move to draw and defend himself. Instead of that, he deliberately struck a match and lighted his cigar, being very careful that it burned evenly. Tossing the useless match aside, he quietly said:

"If I were this Rebal Raguel, and had done what you say, I should surely deserve a hot corner down below."

"Do you still deny you are the wretch?"

"Sure."

"You are a fool! You should know I am not to be deceived in such a manner. Although I have not seen you for five years, I know you too well to make a mistake."

"I must have a double."

"Bah! Why not acknowledge the truth and face it out, like a man?"

"I see it is useless to reason with you."

"You are not reasoning—you are lying!"

"And you are digging your own grave! I have already stood more from you than I ever before endured from living man. I know not why I have permitted you to carry it so far, but I presume it is because I think you honest in your belief. If you carry it further, you will have to meet me in a deadly encounter."

"I ask nothing more. You killed my mother with your brutal kicks; I have sworn to put a bullet through your heart. I shall keep my oath!"

"Then your mother died from the effect of the injuries she received?"

"She did, and I took the oath above her dead body. For five years I have been on your trail. Many times I have thought myself sure of confronting you, but you always managed to give me the slip. I needed money, and in order to obtain it, I turned cowboy. I retained the guise, and with my pard, have run you to earth."

"Then there are two of you."

"Yes."

"I suppose you intend to make an easy job of my disposal?"

"I am the only one you will have to meet; my friend will simply see fair play."

"And take up the affair when you are cold for planting."

"There will be no affair to take up after we meet. I shall send a bullet through your heart, for I never miss. You may kill me at the same instant, but I shall have kept my oath of vengeance. You cannot escape."

"You are a dead shot?"

"Yes."

"What if I refuse to meet you?"

"Then I shall shoot you down like a dog?"

"It is plain you mean business."

"I do."

Sleek Saul removed his cigar from between his lips and calmly blew out two or three perfect rings of smoke. He seemed as unconcerned as if the matter under discussion was of the most trivial nature.

Hurricane Hal watched the gambler as a hawk watches its prey, but it was useless for him to try to read Saul's thoughts. The cold face of the Man of Ice was like a sealed book.

Maverick Mat stood in the background, scarcely taking his eyes from the two men for a single instant, for he was on the alert for a treacherous move on the part of the card-sharp.

The crowd had again commenced to collect before the bar, the excitement in the street having subsided somewhat. Little attention was paid to the two men at the card-table.

Sleek Saul seemed to consider the situation.

"I wonder if there is no way I can convince you of your mistake," he muttered.

Hal made an impatient gesture.

"You may as well drop that tack! Are you ready to meet me like a man?"

"I scarcely think such a meeting will be allowed in Silver. If the marshal becomes aware of it, he will run us both in."

"I believe you are a coward!"

Sleek Saul laughed coldly.

"I am trying to spare you."

Like a flash Hal jerked out a revolver and thrust it almost against the gambler's forehead.

"You are trying to play off till you find some way of escape!" he hotly cried. "But you shall not succeed! You must meet me within ten minutes!"

Still the card-sharp did not appear alarmed.

"That will scarcely give you time to arrange your earthly affairs," he observed.

"It will give all the time I ask. If you have anything to arrange, you had better see that it is immediately attended to."

By this time the inmates of the saloon were attracted by the cowboy's hot words, and the fact that Hal held the drop made it apparent there was trouble coming. Still the throng did not rush forward, for they knew it was well to be at a distance when the bullets began to fly.

Sleek Saul saw Boss Brule standing a short distance behind Hurricane Hal's chair, and, unobserved by any one, signals were exchanged. Then the card-sharp leaned back, giving his chair a dangerous tilt, saying slowly:

"I trust you will be careful how you handle that gun. If it should happen to go off by accident, I would surely catch the ball right where I live. It might settle my hash, but the boys would only wait to get you to the nearest tree. I will guarantee there would be no trial."

The cowboy seemed scarcely to notice the words.

"Are you going to meet me, or will you be shot down like a cur?"

Saul did not reply. He tilted the chair still further and seemed to suddenly lose his balance and fall backward. At the same moment he thrust out his feet and kicked the table over. There was a grand crash and both men were struggling on the floor.

Both Maverick Mat and Boss Brule rushed forward. The ruffian was a trifle the swiftest, and as Hal sprang to his feet the butt of a heavy revolver struck his head with stunning force.

Down in a heap went the cowboy, a thousand lights flashing before his eyes to be followed by a cloud of darkness.

Maverick Mat saw the treacherous blow, and, with a shout of fury, leaped toward the bully.

At that moment Sleek Saul arose, a chair clasped in his hands. The gambler swung this terrible weapon above his head, and Mat received the full force of a powerful blow, being hurled headlong and stunned.

Boss Brule was in for finishing the job.

"Let's wipe 'em out!" he cried.

But Saul replied:

"Drop it! Skip! We have fairly done them up, and that is enough for the present. If they tackle us again, we will finish them."

So the gambler and his satellite hastily left the saloon.

Maverick Mat was the first to start up. He looked around in a dazed manner and saw a throng of faces on every side. A miner was holding a glass of liquor to Hal's lips.

"Derned ef they didn't do ye, pard!" said one fellow, meeting Mat's questioning look. "Sleek Saul's wuss'n pison ter tackle, an' you fellers got off easy."

Suddenly Hal sat up and looked around, muttering:

"Who—struck? Where—what—"

Then his eyes fell on his pard, and he paused.

"It was a big tough who came up behind you, Hal," explained Mat. "I was not in time to take a hand, and I got a crack that laid me out."

"Raguel—where is he?"

"He has skipped."

A cry of rage broke from the cowboy's lips,

and he leaped to his feet, glaring around the saloon.

"Which way did he go?" he demanded. "I will follow him! He shall not give me the slip!"

"He slid out by ther door, pard," volunteered one man. "But ye'd best let him go. Sleek Saul's er bad critter ter monkey with, you bet!"

"Let him go? I have followed him for five years, and I will not be baffled now! Let him go? No! It is his life or mine!"

Then the maddened cowboy dashed toward the door.

Maverick Mat followed his comrade, and the two quickly disappeared.

"Good blood, but derned pore judgment!" commented one old fellow. "Them cow-punchers want ter steer clear of Sleek Saul ef they hain't hankerin' ter 'tend their own funeral."

In vain the cowboy pards searched for the gambler. Both Sleek Saul and his satellite had disappeared, and no one seemed to know whither they had gone.

Finally, Hal and Mat returned to the saloon where the encounter had taken place.

"So ye didn't fine him, did ye?" nodded one who had witnessed the affair. "Wal, it's best ye didn't. Mark me, ye had best keep erway frum Sleek Saul. He is a bad man."

"Just how bad I fancy this town little dreams," said Hurricane Hal. "He is none other than Red Hand, the Marauder of the Mimbres!"

This declaration created the greatest amazement and consternation in the saloon, and a hundred questions were hurled at the two cowboys. They did not try to answer them all, but Hal said:

"I have made no mistake, but I have no time to explain how I know this. Enough that I do know it. He was once known as Rebal Raguel, and he murdered my mother, for which crime I will have his blood as surely as God spares my life!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN APACHE TRAP.

THREE horsemen were riding toward the Diablo Mountains. They were Old True Blue, Zeb Horn and the Indian Soft Foot.

The sun was well down toward the peaks of the Gila Mountains far over the dividing line into Arizona. To the east lay the Mimbres, the home of the dreaded Red Hand.

Already they were close to the foot-hills, but the barren summits ahead looked far from inviting. They seemed journeying toward a desert land.

"Feller never'd dream thar wur a beautiful valley thar whar yeou have yeour home, Zeb," observed Old True Blue.

The old fortune-seeker did not appear to hear the words; his thoughts were of his wife and child, and he was urging his horse to the best pace the animal could hold.

Soft Foot said nothing; his sharp eyes were constantly on the outlook for danger and not for a moment was he unmindful of his surroundings.

"Don't yeou worry, ole pard," advised True, softly touching Zeb's arm. "We're goin' ter git thar durin' ther fu'st of ther night, an' frum whut Soft Fut hes said, I cal'late we'll be erhead of Red Hand an' his devils. Ther marauder does ther most of his work under kiver of ther dark."

Zeb nodded and glanced toward the sinking sun.

"Quite er while 'fore sundown," said the Trusty. "We'll git well inter the maountains by dark. Ef we don't find no 'Paches thar—"

"I hev little fear o' thet," declared Zeb. "Ther red skunks don't offen go inter ther Diablo Mountains. They kinder hole thet section in dread. It is only Red Han' an' his whelps thet I fear."

Suddenly Soft Foot drew rein and leaped from the back of his splendid horse. His companions halted and watched the Indian curiously as he carefully inspected the ground.

"W'at is it, Soft Foot?" Zeb finally asked.

"Thres horses go toward mountains."

"Red or white?"

"Apaches."

The old fortune-seeker gave a start of alarm.

"Are you sure?" he anxiously asked.

"Sure," was the curt reply.

"W'at kin it mean?"

"They were scouts."

"Then there may be others in ther mountains."

"There may be."

"Ef not, why war they goin' this yar way?"

"To meet the Red Hand, it may be."

"Then you think—jest w'at?"

"The Red Hand may join with the Apaches against the pale-faces."

A look of dismay came over Zeb Horn's face.

"In thet case, we may fine reds in ther mountains as well as w'ite skunks."

"It is possible," acknowledged Soft Foot.

"But don't yeou let that git ye down at ther maouth," advised Old True Blue. "Ef we git ter Hidden Pocket erhead of ther varmint, we'll look out fer ther feemale wimmin folkses, by gosh!"

"Come on!" cried Zeb. "Thar hain't no time ter be lost!"

Soft Foot vaulted upon his horse, and once more the trio rode swiftly toward the barren-appearing mountains that loomed dark and forbidding less than ten miles away.

The Indian urged his horse forward till he was the leader. As usual, he was keenly on the alert, his dark eyes appearing to observe everything on the earth below and in the heavens above.

The sun seemed resting on the highest peak of the Gila Mountains when they entered a narrow pass of the foot-hills. From this pass they debouched upon a barren plain of sand hemmed in on all sides by the dark and forbidding hills and mountains. It was a miniature Sahara. Beyond the sand valley lay the Diablo Mountains, looking awesome and repellent in the shadows of oncoming night.

Soft Foot's eyes had been turned several times toward a lonely vulture wheeling high in the air. The keen eyes of the Indian seemed to read a meaning in the very movements of the bird. The pass had been straight and barren, with little cover for an ambush, but Soft Foot had proceeded with great caution. When the sand valley was reached he saw the lone vulture was almost directly overhead.

For a moment a puzzled look rested on the noble Ute's face as his eyes swept the bare plain. He could see no cover for an ambush, yet he was looking for one. Still he well understood the cunning of the Apaches.

The sun had disappeared behind the western mountains; shadows would soon obscure the valley.

"My white brothers may need their rifles," spoke Soft Foot in a cautious tone. "Let them be ready for anything."

They saw him hold his Winchester ready for use as he rode slowly forward, and they imitated his example, well-knowing he seldom made an error.

But what chance could there be for an encounter upon the open sand plain? It was like Apaches to attack from ambush when possible, and there seemed no available cover on the plain.

Soft Foot closely scanned the sandy level. He was looking for something. What was it?

Suddenly he saw what he was looking for.

From the sand a short distance away a pair of gleaming eyes looked up at him!

There was the ambush! The cunning savages had known an ambush would be expected, and they had selected the place where it would be the least looked for.

They were buried in the sand!

The keen glance of the brave Ute quickly detected two more pairs of glittering black orbs looking at their intended victims.

The three Apache warriors had concealed their horses somewhere, and were now waiting for the moment to spring the trap.

Soft Foot did not lift his rifle, but took a quick aim with it still swinging at his side.

Crack!

The weapon spoke and a pellet of lead was sent on its deadly mission.

A wild death-yell followed, the sand upheaved, a dusky figure sprang half erect and then fell back!

Before the Ute could repeat his deadly work two more figures leaped up from their sandy hiding-places, and the war-whoop of the Apaches rung through the valley.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" gasped Old True Blue, as a bullet clipped his ear. "That's whut I call a ressurection!"

The savages had been taken by surprise when they expected to be the surprising party, and their shots were wild. Both Old True and Zeb fired, and their shots were not wasted.

Down went the Apaches to rise no more.

But, barely had they fallen when out from one side of the little valley swept a dozen of their comrades, yelling like fiends.

"Holy smoke!" cried the Trusty. "We have stubbed right inter er nest of ther gosh-blamed critters!"

"Et is er trap!" gritted Zeb Horn.

"Thar may be er chainece ter git threw all right! Come on!"

The trio dashed for the pass at the further side of the valley, the Apaches swerving into line of pursuit.

"It is a race for life," calmly announced Soft Foot. "And there may be more Apaches ahead!"

"Ef so—w'at then?"

"The Black Hole! They will not follow there."

"But ther place is full o' pitfalls! We kin never go through it 'bout a light."

"It may be the only chance. Soft Foot knows it well."

"Wal, we may hev ter 'pend all on you."

As they dashed forward, the Ute glanced back at the oncoming Apaches. He was studying their manner.

The sun had vanished from the view of those in the valley, even though its golden light fell on the ragged peaks ahead and revealed the yawning chasms that seamed their sides and the mighty boulders which seemed scarcely to need the weight of a hand to send them thundering

into the grim depth, leaving destruction in their train and carrying instant death to any living thing that did not escape from their path.

"We must pass through the Black Hole!"

It was Soft Foot who spoke.

"W'at makes ye think so?" queried Zeb. "I kin see nary sign o' red ahead."

"Still they are there."

"Haow dew ye know that?" asked Old True. "Yeou have bin lookin' back all ther time."

"And that is how I have learned there are others ahead. The Apaches are not fools to show themselves to our eyes, but they would remain hidden till the time to spring. You cannot discover they are there by looking for them."

Old Trusty had fought Indians before, and he knew Soft Foot reasoned correctly, so he turned in the saddle and looked back at the pursuing red-skins. He found the band had spread out so as to cut them off from the pass by which they had entered the trap, but did not seem urging their ponies to the utmost in the attempt to overtake them. Their cries were those of triumph.

"Yeou are right, Soft Fut," Old True admitted. "I kin see it neow. They think they have us fast an' tight, an' they wouldn't think thet ef thar wurn't some of their pards erhead. Lead fer ther Black Hoel!"

Soft Foot swerved suddenly toward the right, and the others followed. At this a yell burst from the lips of the pursuing savages.

"Yoop, belast ye!" chuckled Old Ballou. "Yeou critters hain't captered aour top-knots yit, an' by goldin'! I don't mean fer ye ter git mine."

"Be ye sure you kin lead us through ther Black Hoel all right, Soft Foot?" anxiously asked Zeb.

"If you will follow and do as I say," was the quiet reply. "Something may depend on your horses."

"Mine will go 'most anywhar," asserted Old Truman.

Ahead of them was a narrow fissure in the barren wall of the eastern side. Toward that rock-seam they dashed.

The Apaches divined their intention, and immediately began urging their ponies to the utmost. But all efforts to overtake the trio before they could reach the seam were useless. Discovering this, the Indians opened fire, and bullets whistled about the three men.

The fissure was reached and they entered, with Soft Foot at the lead. The place was rough, narrow and dark. At first it was open to the sky above their heads, but the opening became smaller and smaller as they progressed and it grew darker with each moment.

"The Black Hole," as the place was called, was held in superstitious dread by most Indians, and there was little prospect of the Apaches continuing the pursuit.

"We kin escape 'em ef we kin ever git through erlive," said Zeb.

After a time the opening above could no longer be seen and they were in intense darkness. They halted and listened, but there were no sounds of pursuit.

"They may wait for our return," observed Soft Foot. "It will be a long time for nothing. We shall not come out the way we entered."

"We may never come out at all, that's all I'm feared of."

Soft Foot uncoiled a lasso in the darkness, explaining what he was doing.

"My white brothers must follow in a line," he explained. "Our horses must be led, and at one time we shall pass where a deep fall will be on either hand. I will go in advance with the rope in my hand. By holding to the rope, you can tell just how to follow."

It seemed almost madness to attempt the passage of such a place in the horrible darkness that surrounded them, but they knew that was the only way to escape, and the two whites trusted much to the sagacity of their red friend.

They all dismounted and Soft Foot placed the rope in their hands. When all was arranged, he started forward, but Zeb's horse refused to stir.

"Consarn the pesky critter!" spluttered the old fortune-seeker. "Ther Ole Boy's got inter him! He won't budge."

Some time was spent in coaxing the animal. Suddenly Old True exclaimed:

"Hark!"

They listened and heard sounds as of some one approaching from the point where they had entered.

What did it mean?

"Look back!" hissed Zeb.

They saw the glimmer of lights far back in the darkness!

"Great gosh all hemlock!" gasped the Trusty. "Ther redimps of Satan are follerin' us with torches!"

CHAPTER VII.

BENEATH THE STARS.

OLD Ballou spoke the truth.

"Wal, I'll be derved!" softly exclaimed Zeb. Soft Foot was as astonished as the others.

"My white brother will have to abandon his horse," decided the Ute. "If we can get beyond the rift where the lost spirits moan we shall be safe. The Apaches will never follow us further."

Once more the fortune-seeker tried to induce his horse to start, and, to his delight, he was successful. The three moved forward, Soft Foot leading.

Not for a moment did the Indian hesitate, although black darkness surrounded them. He seemed to have the eyes of an owl.

It seemed as if the pursuing Apaches heard them, as a cry, almost fiendish in its import, echoed through the cavern, for they were now underground.

"Yell, belast ye!" gritted Old Truman. "Yeou can't ketch us in that way!"

Soft Foot uttered not a word for some time, but at length he said:

"Now have caution! Close at either side are the death-holes. Cling lightly to the rope, and if a horse falls into a hole, do not let him drag you down."

The pursuing Apaches were not far away, and the light of their torches almost revealed the three friends. Old True glanced back and could discern the dusky forms of the torch-bearers.

For some moments the Ute guide moved with great caution, and at length he said, with evident relief:

"The death-holes are passed. Now for the rift of the wind spirits. When we have passed that we are safe."

He hurried forward with renewed speed.

In a short time they began to hear faint moaning sounds that seemed like the sobbing of lost children. As they went onward the sounds became more distinct.

At this point another yell from the Apaches told they had caught sight of those they were pursuing. The light of the torches reached quite to the trio.

"By thutteration!" spluttered Old Ballou. "I kinder callate it looks like we'd have ter tussle with ther critters arter all."

Still they hurried on.

The moaning sounds became louder and louder with each passing moment, and the horses began to evince symptoms of terror.

At length the sounds seemed to come from the ground almost beneath their feet; then Soft Foot announced they had reached the mysterious rift.

Across the cavern floor stretched a dark line about two feet wide. It was faintly revealed by the light of the torches held by the pursuing reds. The dark line was a break in the rock—a fissure of unknown depth—and out of the opening came the moaning wails which made the Black Hole so dreaded by the Indians, nearly all of whom believed the sounds came from the lips of lost souls imprisoned in regions below.

The three fugitives had some trouble in getting the horses over this seam, but they finally succeeded.

"We are safe now," declared Zeb, as they pressed onward. "Ther 'Paches b'lieve this yar part o' ther cave b'longs ter ther Ole Boy, an' they won't be likely ter foller no fuder."

He was right. The pursuers halted before the moaning rift was reached, and a yell of baffled fury rung through the place.

"Howl ef ye want ter!" said Zeb. "It don't hurt us, an' ef it relieves yer feelin's, we don't keer."

Soon the torches disappeared, and the trio found themselves in blank darkness once more. How long they advanced in such a manner it was difficult to tell, but suddenly they felt a breath of fresh air, and in a few moments they were beneath the stars.

Night had come on while they were in the cavern.

"Waal," drawled Old Truman, "we got threw that place scrumpshus. Thar hain't no o'nery 'Pache goin' ter have aour ha'r ter-night."

"If I only knowed Betsey an' Kate wuz all right!" muttered Zeb Horn.

"They're O. K.," averred the Trusty. "We'll be with 'em 'fore midnight."

"Ef Soft Foot knows ther way from hyer."

"Soft Foot knows the way," assured the Ute.

They were about to start onward, when the Indian gave a low hiss of warning, and drew back into the deeper shadows at the mouth of the Black Hole.

"Whut am it?" asked True.

His question was answered by the appearance of a horseman. One after another, seven horsemen appeared and passed on into the darkness. Barely had the last one disappeared, when Zeb excitedly asked:

"Did you see thet bundle in ther arms o' one o' them critters? It wuz ther middle one."

"I saw it," replied Old Truman.

"It looked like er human critter wrapped in su'thin'."

"Yaas, it did, that!"

"An' them wuz Red Han' an' his gang!"

"I wu'dn't be er gosh blamed bit s'prised."

"If it wuz, who—"

Zeb never finished the question, for he was interrupted in a surprising manner.

From out of the darkness whither the seven

night-riders had disappeared came a wild cry for help—the cry of a female in distress!

The sound struck to the old fortune-seeker's heart like the blade of a keen knife.

"My God!" he hoarsely cried. "Thet wuz ther voice o' my leetle Kate!"

In another moment he was upon the back of his horse, and went dashing toward the point from whence the cry had come.

"Holy smoke! Great thutteration! Gosh all hemlock!" spluttered Old True Blue. "Arter him, Soft Fut! Thet squawk hes jest eternally robbed him of his hoss-sense! He'll sart'inly tackle that hull gang, an' we mus' be on han' ter back him up ther best we know haow."

The Ute and the old man sprung upon their horses and dashed in pursuit of the crazed parent, who had already vanished in the darkness of the defile that had swallowed the night-riders.

The pursuit was destined to be brief indeed.

Ahead in the darkness there were several bright flashes of light, and the reports of fire-arms awoke the echoes of the rocky gorge.

Then, back through the night came a wildly-galloping, riderless horse.

Soft Foot seemed ready for almost any emergency. Round his head circled the lasso he had held since emerging from the Black Hole, and, dark though it was, he made the cast.

It was successful!

The flying animal was one that had felt the noose before, for it had no desire to be thrown. The moment the coil settled around its neck it fell back on its haunches, and stopped almost within its own length.

Old True examined the insnared creature, and quickly declared:

"It's Zeb's! They have socked aour pard!"

Riding onward cautiously they soon came upon a dark figure stretched upon the ground—a figure that caused the horses to rear and snort in alarm.

The Trusty leaped to the ground and knelt beside the fallen figure. A moment's examination was sufficient.

"Pore ole Zeb!" almost sobbed Old True Blue. "It's him, an' them devils have murdered him, sure as preachin'! He's dead as hay!"

CHAPTER VIII.

CORNERED AT THE CABIN.

BARELY had the words passed the lips of the Trusty when the supposed dead man uttered a deep sigh and a low moan.

"Not dead!" exclaimed Soft Foot.

"Bless the Good Lawd!" cried Old Truman.

"I must have felt in ther wrong place fer his heart, fer I wur so kersited I didn't know northin'."

The veteran struck a match and looked for Zeb's wound. It proved to be on the fortune-seeker's head and Zeb's eyes were wide open, but he seemed dazed.

Old True's fingers examined the injury, and an exclamation of relief came from his lips.

"Jest creased, by thutter! That's blessed good luck, an' the ole man's good fer lots of scrummages ter come! He's goin' ter git aout of this, 'tarnal lucky!"

He always carried a flask of liquor with him "in case of emergency," and a few drops of the fiery stuff put new life into the wounded man.

"What—where— It wuz Kate! Them devils—they wuz kerryin' her off! She—I tried to save her. Great Heaven! They shot me down!—they hev got off with her!"

Zeb had started to his feet, but he was weak and faint, and, as he uttered the last despairing cry he would have fallen to the ground had not Old True's strong arms supported him.

"Brace up, pard," advised the Trusty. "Mebbe 'twarn't her arter all."

"Yes it wuz! I know my leetle gal's voice! Thet wuz her, shore!"

"Waal, don't yeou go ter gittin' weak-kneed, fer we'll save her er bu'st aour b'ilers tryin'! Ef we git arter Red Han', he'll come ter ther 'arth with er thump that'll jar ther hull planet."

"Whar is my hoss?" hoarsely demanded Zeb, groping blindly with outstretched hands. "We mus' foller them devils! Whar is my hoss?"

"Are yeou able ter do it—kin ye set in ther saddle?"

"I'll set thar ur die tryin'!"

Old True assisted the crazed parent to mount, and in another moment the three were following the course they believed the kidnappers and murderers had taken.

Both Old True and Soft Foot knew how useless the search in the dark would be, but they understood it would be folly to attempt to reason with Zeb then; they must wait till he was calmer.

Zeb urged his horse forward blindly, but his companions were on the outlook for an ambush. Both Old True and the Ute held their weapons ready for instant use.

But they did not have to use them. The search proved fruitless, as they had thought it would, and even Zeb came to his senses after a time.

"It's no use!" he sobbed, drawing rein. "They hev slipped us in ther dark! Oh, my God! my pore leetle gal—my darlin' Kate!"

"Brace up!" the Trusty again advised. "Ef thet wur yer gal, we'll resky her yit. I'll stan' by ye as long as I kin dror a breath. Yeou know I'm ter look arter Red Han', so I'll be 'tendin' ter my business all ther time an' w'en we find ther sarpint, we'll have ther sojers arter him in less than two shaiks. His career is mighty nigh ther windin' up."

It was a difficult thing for the grief-shaken parent to look at anything but the blackest side, and although Soft Foot joined in the attempt to comfort him, they found it difficult. When he was calmer, they discussed the next move.

"We'd better go on ter ther cabin," urged True.

"Yes," Zeb agreed. "I want ter know w'at hes becum o' Betsey. Thar wuzn't but one captive thet I see with them devils."

The others had seen but one, so their faces were turned toward Zeb's home, Soft Foot once more assuming the lead. They were filled with the darkest forebodings, and all dreaded what they expected to find at the end of the journey. Few words passed between them as they rode through the night.

The moon sailed up over the eastern peaks and shed its pure white light upon the wild mountains. At times it showed them their way, but for the most part they were riding through dark defiles and gloomy, echoing canyons.

The mountains seemed deserted. Not even the howl of a wolf or the hoot of an owl was heard. The ring of iron-shod hoofs was flung from rock to rock.

It was midnight when Hidden Pocket was reached.

An exclamation came from Zeb Horn's lips when he saw his cabin home was still standing, for he had expected to find a mass of smoldering ruins.

But the door was standing open, swinging on its hinges as moved by the night breeze.

The moonlight showed a huge hole in the bank back of the cabin.

It was Zeb's "mine," from which he hoped to take a fourth fortune.

A small stream of water wound through the pocket. Two or three beautiful groves added to the charms of the place. It was a little Eden shut in from the rest of the world.

Zeb urged his horse toward the cabin and leaped down before the door. Old True Blue was at his side.

"Let me go in thar fu'st, Zeb," entreated the veteran. "Yeou stay heur while I go in."

But Zeb would not accede to the request.

"I'm goin' fu'st," he sternly declared. "My narves are sot now, an' I sha'n't mind anythin'. I 'spect ter fine Betsey thar, but I'll avenge her!"

Seeing how useless it was to try to restrain him, Old True followed the owner of the cabin through the open doorway. The moonlight shone in at the door and one window of the deserted cabin and lay pale and ghost-like on the floor. The two men stepped lightly, but the sound of their footfalls startled them.

"Strike a match, pard," whispered Zeb, his voice shaking. "Thar's a lamp hyer somewhere."

The Trusty obeyed, looking for the lamp as soon as the flame was sufficient. He saw it on a little shelf and quickly had it lighted. Then he turned with it in his hand to find Zeb staring at the floor.

At the very feet of the owner of the cabin was a dark stain on the white boards. They both knew what it was.

Blood!

Those men were used to wild scenes—they had witnessed many a violent death—but the sight of that stain upon the floor filled them with a feeling of horror. For at least two minutes neither stirred nor spoke, then the fortune-seeker fairly shrieked:

"It is her blood!"

From the stain on the floor a trail led toward the door—a trail that seemed to indicate a body had been dragged in that direction.

Zeb fell on his knees and lifted his hands.

"Hear me, High Heaven!" he cried. "I sw'ar by all I hole dear to avenge the death o' my wife an' ther wrong to my child! Red Han' shell die for this piece o' work as shore as my life is spared!"

"Amen!" came solemnly from Old True Blue's lips.

"Now," gritted Zeb, "we'll see w'at they hev done with poor Betsey's body."

He turned toward the door, but at that moment Soft Foot appeared and calmly declared:

"We have been followed."

"Who by?" asked True.

"The Apaches!"

"Gosh all hemlock, no! You can't mean it!"

"Soft Foot speaks the truth."

"Whar be they now?"

"They are near at hand."

This was startling information indeed, and the three held a hurried consultation. Soft Foot informed his companions that the Indians were between them and the entrance to the pocket.

"Then we are cut off from 'scapin'!" exclaimed Old True. "Whut in thutteration shell we do?"

"We will have to defend ourselves from the cabin," said the Ute.

"But our hosses?"

"Our lives are worth more than our horses."

No time was to be lost, and they soon decided to turn the cabin into a fort, Old Zeb assuring them he knew a way of escaping if driven to it as a last resort. It was with the greatest regret they abandoned their horses.

"We'll git ther critters back ergain ef we do have ter lose 'em," asserted True.

The Indian nodded grimly.

The cabin door was closed and fastened, and none too soon, for a band of horsemen appeared and rode straight toward the cabin. They were Apaches! Their plumes nodded and their lances glittered in the bright moonlight. There were at least thirty of them.

Some distance away they halted and held a consultation. The guttural sound of their voices was plainly heard by the three men cornered in the cabin. Now and then they motioned toward the cabin and the horses standing in front of it.

Zeb had withdrawn the plugs from some loopholes arranged in the cabin walls, for the place had been built with a view of making a strong defense if the emergency arose. From the holes the trio watched the savage band.

"By gosh!" exclaimed Old True Blue. "We are in an all-thutterin' scrape, sure as preachin'! Thar is one holy gang of 'em, an' they'll reach fer our ha'r an' reach hard!"

Zeb said nothing, but he did not appear badly frightened. It seemed as if the shock of his bereavement had benumbed his senses.

At length an Indian rode toward the cabin, waving a white rag from his lance-point.

"Hold on thar, yeou critter!" shouted the Trusty, when he thought the red-skin was near enough. "Whut do yeou want?"

"The pale-faces must surrender to the great chief of the Apaches," was the reply, spoken in very good English.

Soft Foot uttered a low exclamation of surprise.

"That is Geronimo!" was his startling declaration.

CHAPTER IX.

"MET AGAIN!"

HURRICANE HAL was not inclined to spend much time in explaining his assertion that Sleek Saul was the dreaded Marauder of the Mimbres, Red Hand, although the declaration produced unlimited surprise and consternation. A hundred questions were poured in upon the two cowboys, but they got away from the crowd and left the saloon as soon as possible.

Once more they began their search for the vanished gambler, Hal not being satisfied with what they had already done.

"If I can get trace of him," he grimly muttered, "I will lose no time in following him, no matter where he may have gone. If he is given time, he may slip away and throw me off the trail again."

So they went the rounds of the camp once more.

It happened that they learned of the information brought Zeb Horn by Soft Foot, the Ute, and Hal at once came to a conclusion.

"If Red Hand intends to make a raid on that ole man's home, then that explains where he has gone. It is pretty certain he has left Silver, and of course he has hastened to join his men, who have probably been instructed to meet him at some point to the north. If we turn our faces toward Zeb Horn's home we shall be moving toward our game."

Mat was not sure of that, but he usually trusted to the sagacity of his pard in most things, and, as it made little difference to him whither he went, he stood ready to accompany Hal.

They made inquiries concerning the location of Zeb's cabin, but the information they received was very vague and unsatisfactory. But little was known of the old fortune-seeker, and they could only find out that he lived somewhere in the Diablo Range away to the north.

"Well," muttered Hal, a hard look settling on his face, "if that is all we can learn, we shall have to trust to Providence. It may be a foolish move anyway, but having discovered I am so near the man I hate with such intense hatred, I can't remain idle. I must do something or go wild."

"Then we will strike out for the mountains," smiled Mat. "We will pray for good fortune, and let it go at that."

Their next move was to obtain a certain amount of provisions—enough to last them three or four days, but of such a quality that its bulk was comparatively small. This being done, they turned their backs to Silver and their faces toward the northern mountains.

Night had fallen when they found themselves fairly within the mountains and decided to encamp. They scarcely imagined there were Apaches in the vicinity so near Silver, yet they thought caution worth observing and resolved to build no fire.

The camp—if camp it could be called—was made in a small grove of mesquite that grew close under a frowning bluff. Having satisfied their own hunger and placed their horses where

they could feed, they lay for some time discussing the situation and forming plans.

Hal was in a sober mood, his defeat of the day making him feel anything but pleasant. It seemed that fate was against him, else his deadly enemy would not have escaped under the circumstances.

"But even fate shall not baffle me!" he cried, sternly. "I have set out to hunt that devil down, and nothing shall keep me from accomplishing my purpose!"

"And I will stand by you to the end," came soberly from Maverick Mat's lips. "I have not forgotten that you saved my life when six Santa Fe roughs had downed me and were about to stamp me out. You stepped in at the risk of your own life and cowed them all. We have been pledged pards ever since, and where you lead I am ready to follow, if it is straight into the mouth of the infernal regions!"

Hurricane Hal held out his hand and grasped that of his comrade, speaking with deep feeling:

"I know you utter the truth, Mat. I honestly believe you would follow me into the fiery pit if you thought you could aid me by so doing. You are true blue clean through."

The words made Mat blush with pleasure, but the shadows hid his heightened color.

After they had talked for some time, both wrapped themselves in their blankets, little dreaming of danger and the advisability of one standing guard while the other slept. They soon were slumbering better than they would had their couch been a downy bed instead of one of grass.

While they slept the moon crept up over the eastern peaks.

Suddenly Mat awoke. He lay still, feeling certain something had aroused him. At first he could hear nothing but the whispering of the wind in the branches above his head.

After some time he detected a sound of an uncertain nature. He was unable to locate the direction from whence it came, but it seemed to be approaching, and he aroused his companion.

"What is it?" asked Hal.

"Hush! Listen!"

In a few seconds they made out that it was the tramp of horses' feet.

"Horsemen!" whispered Hal. "They are coming this way! We must look after our animals!"

Leaping to their feet they hurried to their horses and stood with their hands upon the animals' muzzles. They were in the deep shadow of the bluff.

Less than half a minute passed before a line of horsemen appeared passing along the brink of the bluff over their heads. In all there were seven, and one carried a huge bundle in his arms—a bundle that looked like a human figure. The moonlight revealed them plainly, while the cowboys were hidden by the shadow of the bluff.

The night riders passed on and disappeared.

"By heavens!" excitedly whispered Hurricane Hal. "I believe those were Red Hand and his men!"

Mat was inclined to think so too.

"Did you notice the bundle one of them carried?" he asked.

"Yes. It looks like the figure of a human being."

"Just what I thought. Perhaps it was."

"It is not impossible. Some captive they intend holding for ransom."

"Or Zeb Horn's girl. You know those of whom we tried to learn where Zeb lives spoke of the old man's daughter."

"Yes."

"It is not impossible Red Hand has accomplished his raid on the old miner's home."

"Quick work, if he has, for it is not yet midnight."

"But I believe I have hit it."

While they were talking they were startled by an outburst of yells coming from the direction in which the night riders had disappeared, then came the rattle of fire-arms.

"Indians, by Jove!" exclaimed Mat.

"And those unknown horsemen have run into them!"

"Sure!"

The battle was brief and furious.

"We had better get out of this," was Mat's opinion.

Hal thought so too, and they were soon ready to move. By that time the fight was over and silence reigned.

Mounting their horses, the cowboys rode from the grove, taking care to keep within the deeper shadows. For two or three miles they proceeded in silence, then Hal suddenly drew rein, whispering:

"Hark!"

They listened and heard the sounds of approaching horses. Drawing well into the shadows, they waited, their hands on their weapons.

In a short time two horsemen appeared, and it happened they drew rein within a short distance of the hidden cowboys.

"We wuz mighty lucky ter git off with our skelps, Cap," observed one.

The reply of the other was a furious exclamation.

"I reckon ther most of ther boys wuz wiped

out," added the first speaker. "The gal is gone, fer I seen Ike Finch go down with ther fu'st fire, an' he hed her in his arms."

"Yes, she is gone, curse the luck! and the best men of the band are gone, too! I did not dream the infernal Apaches had dared come so near the Fort and Silver City."

At the sound of this man's voice, Hurricane Hal gave a great start and clutched the wrist of his comrade. He now fairly hissed:

"That is *Rebal Raguel!* We are met again!" Then he touched his horse with the spur, and the animal sprang forward.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT DID IT MEAN?

THE cowboy uttered a triumphant shout as he broke from the deeper shadows. Maverick Mat, although surprised by his companion's sudden action, was quick to move, and followed Hal in a moment, his hand dropping on a weapon.

It seemed as if the two outlaws took the alarm at the same instant, for they wheeled to fly almost as Hal's horse gave the first leap.

"Stop!" cried the cowboy, his voice ringing out commandingly. "Stop, *Rebal Raguel!* Face me like a man!"

If the outlaw heard and understood the command, he heeded it not. The desperadoes spurred their horses onward, striking into the darkness of a narrow defile.

"He shall not escape me again!" gritted Hurricane Hal, as he again tipped the spurs he wore with blood. "The time of retribution has come, and he shall meet the fate he so richly merits! He must be well-mounted, indeed, if his horse can hold its own with Flash."

The outlaw was well mounted. In fact, it was said Red Hand owned the best horse in Southern New Mexico. It happened that the chief's companion was also mounted on a magnificent animal, and the cowboys were destined to have a more difficult chase than they thought possible.

Maverick Mat was scarcely two lengths behind his pard, but Hal did not cast a look over his shoulder to see whether his friend was following or not. His only thought just then was of vengeance.

Hal had not touched a weapon. His one thought was of overtaking the wretch who had destroyed his mother.

"Halt!" shouted the foremost pursuer—"halt, *Rebal Raguel!* If you are not a coward, you will turn and face me!"

There was no response. Still the outlaws fled on through the night, their moving figures only being discerned as darker bulks in the blackness. Occasionally a spark of fire would flash from beneath the iron-shod hoofs of their horses, and the rocky defile was echoing with the clattering ring of the animals' feet.

There is something wildly exhilarating in a dash through the darkness of a summer's night mounted on a mettlesome steed even when such a dash is for pleasure; but when it means life or death, it sets the blood bounding through one's veins and fills him with a wild and almost uncontrollable excitement. Every nerve of his body is drawn to its full tension.

It is doubtful if Hurricane Hal experienced such an emotion, for his mind was not in the condition to do so. He only wished to overtake the man he was pursuing.

But Maverick Mat was filled with the enthusiasm of the chase.

"We'll run 'em down, pard!" he cried. "They can't shake these boys!"

Hal did not turn his head; he did not seem to hear.

On—on—away through the night! Sometimes it was wonderful how the horses kept their feet, for they were dashing over rocky ground where they would have carefully picked their way had it been in the broad light of day.

Far more than an hour the chase continued before it became evident that either pursued or pursuer had gained. Mat had kept close to his pard's side, but few words had passed between them. At length the blonde cowboy observed:

"I believe they are pulling away from us!"

The same thought had come to Hurricane Hal, and for the first time he touched a weapon. A revolver appeared in his hand, and he shouted:

"Halt, or we fire!"

No reply. Still the outlaws dashed on.

"Let them have it, Mat!" cried Hal. "Great heavens! I fear they will escape if we cannot bring them down!"

Then both the cowboys opened fire. The flashes of flame blinded them so they could no longer see the dark figures of the two men they were pursuing, but they continued to pull trigger, firing blindly with the hope that a chance shot would bring down the game they were after.

But, they were not to do all the shooting. Ahead of them there were flashes of fire and bullets began to whistle around their ears. Red Hand and his companion were beginning to show their teeth.

For a time this running fire was continued, but, suddenly, Hurricane Hal's horse went down sending the cowboy flying over its head.

Had not Hal been on the guard for such a

thing, he must surely have sustained serious injury. As it was, he alighted fairly on his feet. Without turning back, he lifted his revolvers and worked the triggers, but only the dull click of hammers falling on empty shells was heard.

The weapons were empty!

With a groan of dismay, Hal turned back to look to his horse.

Mat had dashed past his friend before he was able to draw rein, but he turned as quickly as possible.

Hal found his horse struggling to its feet.

"Poor old Flash!" he exclaimed. "I expect you have got it for good! It is probably a broken leg."

To his astonishment, the animal arose to its feet, and did not appear to be injured in the least. A hasty examination failed to show a wound or an injury, and, with delight, Hal came to the conclusion that the fall had been caused by a stumble, and not by the horse being struck with a bullet.

"How is he, pard?" anxiously asked Mat.

"Appears all right," was the reply. "I will know if he is, for I am going to give him another try. It does not seem possible that Fate will allow *Rebal Raguel* to escape me again."

In a moment he was in the saddle, and the gallant horse at once sprang forward once more.

"I believe he is not hurt," decided Hal, "but I fear *Raguel* has had time enough to give us the slip in the darkness."

Such proved to be the case. They soon came to a point where the outlaws could have taken their choice of three courses, and although they listened, not a sound told which one they had chosen.

"We shall have to depend on fate to guide us aright," came almost despairingly from Hal's lips. "The ground is so rocky here that, were it broad daylight, nothing but the keen eyes of a red-skin trailer could determine which course those men took."

So they chose a course at random and rode onward, keenly on the alert for some sign of those they were pursuing. But they were not destined to overtake Red Hand that night.

On and on they rode. At length Hal drew rein, venting an exclamation of despair.

"Baffled again! Great heaven! will my time never come?"

Mat did his best to cheer him, but words were wasted on the disheartened cowboy just then.

"Satan must aid him!" he muttered, brokenly. "I fancied our horses as good as the best, but those men were better mounted."

"Your fall—that was what enabled them to give us the slip."

"They were drawing away from us before that."

Mat could say nothing, for he knew this was true.

"Which way shall we turn now?" he asked.

Hal shook his head.

"Any way; don't ask me. I care not whither we go or what we do."

Mat decided to ride onward, and so they did so. From the shadows of the ravines they rode out into the moonlight of higher land.

Suddenly Mat drew rein, crying softly:

"Listen!"

Both did so, and they plainly heard the distant reports of firearms and the wild yells of human beings.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Mat. "These mountains are boiling with excitement to-night. What do you make of those sounds pard?"

"They are red-skin yells."

"Sure!"

"And the shots make it seem as if a battle was going on."

"Right you are."

"It is probably between reds and whites."

"I reckon."

"Shall we go on?"

"You say."

After discussing the situation a minute, they decided to advance cautiously, for they thought it possible *Raguel* and his companion had again met red foes and were fighting for life.

"If that is so, they are making a stiff battle of it," asserted Mat, as the shots and yells became more and more distinct. "From the sounds, I should say there must be half a hundred Indians, at least."

They finally selected a place to conceal their horses, and then they advanced on foot, taking as much precaution as possible, for they knew not what danger they might fall into.

They did not go far before they found themselves on their stomachs looking down into a beautiful pocket from whence came all the sounds. Below them they saw a lone hut surrounded by a horde of savages. The moonlight now plainly revealed everything in the pocket. Not far from the cabin three or four bodies were stretched on the ground, telling the tale of the unerring aim of the defenders of the lone hut.

"The red bellions are having a hard time to take the scalps of whoever is within that cabin," whispered Mat.

"That is so," reiterated Hal. "I scarcely understand it. Why don't they fire the hut and

roast the inmates out? That is their usual trick."

It did seem strange the red-skins had not fallen back on a stratagem so reliable, and neither of the cattlemen could understand it.

But the warriors soon had recourse to another trick. They found a heavy tree that old Zeb had cut down for some purpose—the cowboys were looking into Hidden Pocket—and seizing it they charged on the door of the hut.

From two of the loop-holes came spouts of flame and the reports of two rifles rung out. Two more warriors bit the earth, but the charge was not checked.

Crash!

The butt of the heavy timber struck against the door. With yells of fury, the red-skins drove it again and again against the stout barrier.

"They are going to hammer their way in!" excitedly whispered Mat.

"Sure enough!"

"Why don't those people in there drop a few more of the red skunks?"

"Perhaps their ammunition has given out."

It seemed as if the defenders of the cabin had met with misfortune or were dazed with terror caused by their hopeless condition, for not a shot was fired after the heavy tree struck against the door. This appeared to give the warriors new courage, and with wild yells they drove the battering-ram again and again against the portal.

"By Jove! that is a stout door!" whispered Mat.

"But it is giving way!" added Hal.

"Yes; they will have it down in another minute!"

"Then we shall witness a horrible butchery!"

"If we stay to witness it."

"We can do nothing to aid those in the cabin."

"Not a thing. It would be folly for us to reveal ourselves, for we would only throw our lives away without doing those unfortunates any good."

"Say!"

"Yes."

"I believe that is Zeb Horn's cabin!"

"Great Caesar! I reckon you are right!"

"And he has a girl!"

"Yes."

"We must do something!"

There is no telling what the natural chivalry of the two young men would have prompted them to do, but at that moment the door went down with a great crash and the yelling Apaches poured into the cabin.

"It is too late!" groaned Mat.

"We could not have saved them anyway," said Hal.

"Now they will be dragged out and slaughtered!"

They waited for the fearful spectacle.

The savages remained in the cabin a long time, and their cries had ceased, strangely enough.

"Hanged if I can understand that!" whispered the blonde cowboy.

"Nor I."

Five—ten—twenty minutes passed. Indians passed in and out of the cabin. They all seemed excited, but their cries were hushed.

They gathered in little knots near the door and seemed discussing something in low tones. Then torches were procured and they once more entered the cabin to the extent of nearly half the band. The others gathered near the cabin and continued the low talking.

The witnesses of this strange scene were filled with astonishment and mystified beyond measure.

Where were the defenders of the cabin?

"Have they hidden somewhere inside?" asked Hal.

"Impossible," was Mat's quick reply. "The reds would soon find them."

"Then what has happened?"

"You have asked me too much."

Nearly half an hour more was spent about the cabin by the Indians, then they all gathered in a circle a short distance away and one of their number addressed them. The watching cowboys could hear the speaker's words, but neither understood the language.

"They have escaped!" triumphantly whispered Hal.

"It looks like it," admitted his pard; "but, how the trick was worked is beyond my comprehension."

"Why don't the reds fire the cabin? That would roast them out, if they were hiding anywhere within."

"The Apaches act frightened."

"Just what I thought."

After the first speaker had finished two other warriors briefly addressed the band, then hasty preparations were made for departure. The dead and wounded were gathered up and taken along, and the baffled band moved toward the pass that led from the pocket.

The cabin was left standing, and not a red-skin turned to look back. They passed from the moonlight into the dark shadows of the wooded walls and disappeared from the sight of the two wondering cowboys.

What did it mean?

CHAPTER XI.

RED HAND'S RED WORK.

"CAN you see your father, Kate?"
 "No, mom; daddy hain't showed up yit."
 "Too bad! I'm dredful worried!"
 "Ye must be narvous, mom."
 "I 'low's I be, but I can't seem ter shake it off. Seems like somep'n powerful bad's goin' ter happen."

The girl came in from the open cabin door and passed one white shapely arm around her mother's neck.

"Ye seems ter be gittin' in a bad way o' late, mommy," she said. "You are lookin' heap thinner then w'at ye'd oughter, an' yer cheeks are pale. I don't like it, mom."

The woman bent over her work and said nothing for the time. She was of middle age and had evidently been pretty in her younger days, for she had not entirely lost her good looks, although the girl spoke the truth when she said her mother was looking thin and pale. She was plainly but neatly dressed in homespun stuff, as also was her daughter.

But it was the face of the girl that would attract the eyes of a stranger. She was more than pretty—she was handsome in a certain way. Her beauty was not of the regal, stately kind, for she was rather slight and petite, but there was an irresistible charm about her sweet face. Her features were cast in a nearly perfect mold, her lips red, her teeth pearly white, her eyes blue as the open summer sky. To be true, her complexion was not of the white, transparent kind that belongs to hot-house beauties, for she had been in the habit of exposing herself to all kinds of weather, but her brown cheeks did not detract from her good looks. Her hair was like strands of sunshine.

Above all else, the expression of her face was that of purity and innocence. Strangely enough, although her speech showed how limited was her education, the dull look of an ignorant person could not be discerned about her. Although she knew little of books, she had learned from the mountains, the flowers, brooks and blue skies. She was a child of nature, reared in the wilds and companioned with the solitudes.

These were Zeb Horn's wife and child, and they were watching for his return from Silver City.

"W'at makes ye so pale an' thin, mommy?" Kate asked, after several minutes of silence.

"You don't seem a tall like you used ter."

"Didn't I tell ye I had been worried, child?"

"W'at about, mommy?"

"'Bout you—'bout all o' us."

"W'y w'at's ter worrit ye, mom? Hain't we—uns all right? We gits enough ter eat an' drink an' wear. W'at's ter worrit ye?"

"Wal, Kate, I've bin thinkin' 'bout you—'bout your growin' up 'thout no eddycashun. You'll be as ignerent as ever wuz me an' yer ole dad."

"Now don't ye go fer ter let thet trouble ye. I'm all right. W'at do I want o' eddycashun?"

"You wants it so you kin git a good man w'en ye comes ter git merried."

"Git merried—me! Ha! ha! ha! Mommy, you do make me laugh! W'y, I hain't goin' ter git merried—I hain't!"

The mother smiled knowingly.

"You say thet, but yer ole mommy knows heep sight better. You is shore ter git merried sooner ur later, an' I wants ter see ye git er man as is worthy o' ye."

"Oh, but I'll never git merried! I'm goin' ter live with you an' daddy alwus an' alwus. I won't never leave ye—never, never!"

"But we'll hev ter leave you some time."

Kate looked astounded.

"You leave me!" she gasped. "W'y, w'at kin you mean, mommy? W'y sh'ud you leave me?"

She clung closer to her mother, and the woman put both arms around the child she idolized.

"Ev'rybody has ter leave ev'rybody else some time," she said, in a rude attempt to explain without directly speaking of death.

A look of pain drove the astonishment from the girl's face, and she clung closer to her mother, stooping to drop a kiss on the woman's forehead.

"I know now," she said, slowly. "But I don't like ter think o' thet. W'at is death for, anyhow?"

"I do not know, child; but I reckon it is fer ther best, else God w'u'dn't 'low it ter exist. I reckon ev'rythin's fer ther best, ef we only knowed it, though some things do seem powerful hard ter bear. This life hain't only er prepyrashun fer ther life arter this."

Kate was plainly distressed.

"Is this w'at hes bin troublin' ye o' late, mommy?" she asked.

Mrs. Horn hesitated an instant, then frankly replied:

"Yes, child, this is w'at hes bin troublin' me ther most."

"An' w'at sot ye ter thinkin' o' this now?"

"My dreams."

"Dreams? W'at wuz they?"

"They wuz powerful bad, deary."

"Tell me 'em."

"Wal, they wuz all erlike, an' in ev'ry one I saw myself layin' dead."

Kate shuddered.

"But you know dreams alwuz go ter contry-wise, mommy."

"W'en ye dreams 'em once they do; but they alwuz comes true w'en ye dreams 'em three nights in succession one arter t'other."

"An' did ye dream this thet way?"

"Yep."

The girl had turned quite pale, and she averted her face so her mother should not see the change in her countenance; but the woman was quick to detect the move, and she exclaimed:

"W'at is it, Kate—w'at makes ye turn away? You're all trimbly like! Look at me, child!"

Choking down the sob that arose in her throat, the girl obeyed, but her mother saw she was on the point of bursting into tears and there was a great terror in her blue eyes. Instantly Mrs. Horn's soft heart smote her for speaking of death and separation at such a time, and she cried:

"You mus'n't mine it, leetle one—you mus'n't mine it, Kate! I'd oughter been more keerful o' w'at I wuz sayin', an' not frightuned ye so at sech a time."

Kate sunk on her knees and buried her face in her mother's lap, beginning to sob, but saying, brokenly:

"It—wuzn't—thet—mommy!"

It was Mrs. Horn's turn to be amazed.

"Wuzn't thet?" she echoed. "Then w'at wuz it? I dunno as I 'preciate jest w'at ye means, child. You's talkin' kinder riddley like."

For some time Kate did not speak, and all the while her mother was coaxing her to explain. Finally, she sobbed:

"I don't want to, mommy—I can't!"

Never before had the child acted so strangely, and Mrs. Horn felt sure there was a reason for this. She determined to learn that reason, if possible, but she saw she must first get the girl into a calmer mood, so she fell to soothing her as best she could.

When Kate had ceased to sob, but still lay with her head in her mother's lap, the woman again asked her to explain her strange acts and words. Immediately she fell to trembling again, but did not burst into tears. After a while she said, slowly:

"I do not want ter tell ye, mommy. It won't do no bit o' good, an' I reckon it's best I don't tell."

Still Mrs. Horn insisted, and after a time she was successful.

"I had er dream las' night," faltered Kate, her voice sounding hoarse and unnatural.

An icy hand seemed to grasp the woman's heart, but she managed to ask:

"A dream?—w'at kind o' a dream, child?"

A great shudder shook the girl's slender frame, and she sobbed:

"Oh, don't make me tell, mommy—I can't tell!"

Again Mrs. Horn fell to coaxing, and in a moment Kate said:

"I dreamed you wuz dead, too!"

A gasp came from the woman's lips, and the girl lifted herself and clasped her mother in a convulsive grasp.

"Oh, don't mind it, mommy!" she begged, her cheeks pale and her blue eyes growing wild, while her golden hair slipped from its coil and streamed adown her back. "I hev heerd you say thar wuz nuthin' in dreams—nuthin' a tall. You 'member you hev said so? Course you do! Oh, you can't die—you musn't! It w'u'd kill me! Oh, what a horrible dream!"—becoming still wilder in her excitement and horror as the full memory overcame her. "I saw you lyin' dead at my feet—you, my own, own mommy! Thar wuz blood all over ye—blood, blood, blood! Oh, ther horror—ther horror! Yer face wuz all stained—your sweet face, dear mommy! I fell down beside ye, an' I called an' called, but you never spoke ner stirred! I caught ye in my arms—oh, so stiff an' cold! You wuz dead, dead, dead! Then I woke an' cried in ther night fer hours. Oh, w'at made me tell you this—w'at made me!"

The woman clasped the girl—her only child—close to her heart, saying brokenly:

"It is strange we both sh'ud dream sech a thing, but we'll putt our trust in God. He is shore ter do all things right. Never lose faith in Him, child, no matter w'at may happen. An' ef—ef I—ef yer pore ole mommy sh'ud be taken frum ye, alwus 'member I done my best fer ye. I'd 'a' done more ef I c'u'd. An' yer daddy—he made some mistakes, but he alwus did w'at he 'lowed wuz fer ther best. Ef he'd only been satisfied w'en he wuz w'ith er heap o' money 'thout wantin' ter double ther pile, ye might hev had an eddycashun an' bin fit fer ther fines' man in all ther lan' now. But he alwus said it wuz fer you thet he wanted ter git more. He w'u'd hev ye ez rich ez ther fines' lady in all creation. Thet's whar he made his mistake, but don't ye never blame him, child—"

Some soft brown fingers closed over her lips and checked her abruptly.

"W'at are ye sayin', mommy! Ye know I never'd hole one hard thought o' my ole daddy—never! He is ther best father a child ever hed—ther very best!"

"I'm glad ye think thet, fer w'en I'm gone—"

Again she was checked.

"Don't—don't speak o' thet! It is foolish, fer you hain't goin' ter die fer y'ars. I won't listen!"

Mrs. Horn tried to force a smile, but it was a dismal failure.

"I feel as if I mus' talk o' it now, fer suthin' tells me ef I don't I'll never hev ernother chance. Them dreams—"

But Kate fell to sobbing and entreating her not to say more just then, and she desisted for the time. They spoke of other things, and while they were talking they failed to see a small party of horsemen who rode into the little pocket.

Every man wore a mask over his face!

Suddenly the tramp of horses' feet at the door aroused the mother and child.

"It is daddy!" shouted Kate, leaping to her feet. "He hes come back frum—"

She ended with a cry of dismay, for a masked man strode in at the cabin door. His hands were concealed by blood-red gloves.

It was Red Hand, the Marauder of the Mimbres!

"Ah! good-evening, ladies," spoke the famous outlaw, lifting his sombrero. "Perhaps I may be a little previous in saying good-evening, but the sun has dropped behind the Western peaks, so I reckon it will go."

Kate recoiled, gazing at the desperado in horror and dread.

Mrs. Horn took a step forward to her daughter's side, and faced the outlaw defiantly.

"Who are you, sir?" she demanded.

For reply the Marauder held up his red-gloved hands significantly.

"That wretch!" cried the woman.

The bandit bowed.

"I have that honor," he answered.

"Honor!" came scornfully from the mother's lips. "You do not know ther meanin' o' ther word, ef ther stories I have heard o' ye are true!"

Kate caught hold of her mother convulsively, whispering:

"Mommy, mommy, do have care! Don't speak thet way! W'at kin you be thinkin' o'!"

The words seemed to cool the woman, and she saw she had made a bad step.

Red Hand laughed, shortly.

"I do not mind that," he calmly declared.

"It is but the foolish talk of a woman. Let her talk while she can, she will weep when we are gone."

"We?" gasped Mrs. Horn. "Then there are others?"

"Sure," was the reply, and several more figures appeared just beyond the open doorway.

"I am not alone by any means."

"W'at do ye want hyer?"

"There, now you are coming to the point! I came here for a purpose."

Once more the woman felt that hand of ice fall on her heart.

"That it is not er good purpose is sart'in er-nough."

"That is all in the way you look at it."

"W'at is it?"

The marauder lifted one red-gloved hand and pointed a finger straight at Kate.

"I have come for that girl!" he declared.

In a moment the mother's arms were about her child.

"You shall not tetch her!" she cried.

A short laugh came from behind Red Hand's sable mask.

"What is to prevent?" he asked.

"Ther hau' o' God!" burst from the mother's lips. "He will protect ther helpless an' ther innocent!"

"That kind of talk sounds very well, but it is all sound and nothing else," sneered the outlaw.

"I have taken a fancy to this girl, for she is indeed a peerless creature, and I have come for her. You will be wise if you make little fuss about it, for what can two women do against seven men."

"Coward!" flashed from the defiant woman's lips. "You fling thet at us! Dare ter tetch my child an' I will call down ther curse o' God on yer wicked head!"

Red Hand advanced with a scornful laugh, but Mrs. Horn placed herself in his path.

"Back!" she cried, her voice rising to a shriek—"back you wretch! Oh, God, protect my child!"

The Marauder caught her wrist and whirled her aside.

"Fool!" he hissed. "Would you dare face the Red Hand of the Mimbres? I have sworn to have the girl, and Satan himself cannot keep me from her!"

Then he leaped forward and seized Kate in his powerful arms, a wild cry of despair breaking from the lips of the horrified girl.

Mrs. Horn had sunk on her knees, her hands uplifted to heaven, but that cry brought her to her feet.

"Wretch!" she shrieked. "Inhuman monster, let go o' thet child! God help me now!"

Then she rushed bare-handed upon him. Red Hand was unprepared for such an attack, and the shower of blows from her fists fairly dazed

him. She caught the girl from his grasp and retreated.

"Furies!" he howled, springing upon her. "You she devil!"

Once more he tore the girl from her mother, sending the woman reeling backward. At the same moment he snatched out a revolver and fired straight at Mrs. Horn's breast.

With a scream of agony, the poor mother flung up her arms and fell heavily to the floor!

CHAPTER XII.

SILVER TONGUE.

It was a most dastardly shot, the act of an inhuman monster! Had the dream of the unfortunate girl come true so quickly?

For one moment Red Hand seemed a bit dazed by his own mad act, then he snarled:

"Her own folly brought it!"

Some of his men had crowded into the cabin, but, strangely enough, they stood as if horror-stricken by the red work of their heartless chief—and they were accustomed to red work themselves.

As for little Kate, she seemed turned to stone for a time, and no sound broke from her lips. Lifting her in his arms, the Marauder turned toward the door.

Then, uttering a shriek of horror and despair, she managed to free herself from the clutch of the red-handed murderer.

"Mommy! mommy! mommy!"

She sprang to her fallen mother's side and dropped on her knees. Again and again she called to the poor woman, but there was no answer to her cries. She tried to lift her mother in her arms and her hands touched something damp and warm—something that filled her with still greater horror. She lifted her hands, and the waning light showed the crimson stain upon them.

"Blood!" she screamed—"blood, blood!"

Red Hand took a step toward her.

"Off!" she cried, thrusting her blood-stained hands toward him with a repellent gesture. "Back, murderer! Don't ye durst tetch me ergain! Hev ye not done enough? You hev killed my pore ole mother!"

The Marauder seemed chained in his tracks by the tragic power of her voice. He really recoiled a bit as she held up those crimson hands.

"Look, ye wretch!" came thrillingly from her white lips. "See! It is her blood—her blood o' ther pore woman ye murdered! May ther cuss o' God foller ye an' your dastard ban! May ye never know er moment o' peace from this minute! May all yer happiness turn ter gall an' wormwood! an' in ther en' may ther retribution that ye desearve overtake ye!"

Having uttered this curse, a great cry broke from her lips, and she fell senseless across her mother's body.

When she became conscious again it was night and her face was fanned by a cool breath of air. She felt a motion and heard the tramp of horses' feet. Darkness lay dense around her, but the stars were twinkling overhead.

Where was she?

For a time the question troubled her, for she could not remember what had happened—everything seemed a blank. She felt sure she was on the back of a horse, but what kept her there?—how came she there?

After a time she determined she was held in the arms of a horseman. There were others near, but all were riding silently through the night.

There was a dull, throbbing pain in her head, and she fancied the pain kept her from remembering what had happened. Her position was far from easy, but she made no effort to change it, as she did not seem to have command of her own will.

For some time she tried in vain to think what had occurred, but at length it began to come to her by degrees. She remembered her own horrible dream—she remembered her mother had told of her dreams—she remembered—*everything!*

When a certain point was reached, memory came with a rush—like a flash. It overwhelmed her with its horror. Then followed the thought that this might be a dream. It could not be true!

Again a time was spent in trying to determine if she were awake or dreaming, and in the end she realized she was indeed awake. Then it was no dream—her poor mother was dead! She had seen the dastard shoot her down! She was now in the power of the Marauder, and he was carrying her away to a fate worse than death!

"Help, help! Save me!"

Her cry rung wildly through the night, and it reached her father's ears!

She heard an answering shout—the outlaws heard it. An execration fell from Red Hand's lips.

"Quick!" came the order; "Jetby and Durk wheel back here with me! The girl's squawk has been heard! We shall be pursued! Finch, you go on with the girl."

Kate tried to scream again, but the broad hand of Ike Finch covered her lips and smothered her appeal. In a few moments she heard a rattle of revolver-shots not far behind, and a

short time later the three men who had turned back joined the others.

"We cooked one of them," declared Red Hand. "He tumbled headlong from his horse at the first pop."

Then the Marauder led them swiftly into the deeper darkness of a side defile, saying, with a chuckle of satisfaction:

"If there are others, they will have a good time following us."

After twenty or thirty minutes, they paused and listened for sounds of pursuit, but none were to be heard. Red Hand laughed.

"We got rid of them easy enough," he said.

Again they went on, and Kate made no offer to cry out again. She had quite lost her courage, and now she cared not what became of her.

How long they rode she could not tell, but suddenly Red Hand halted with an exclamation of alarm. At that moment there were a dozen flashes of light in the darkness and a wild chorus of savage yells rung out.

The outlaws had come upon a small band of red-skins.

With the first shots the girl heard the man who held her utter a hollow groan, then he fell headlong to the ground, still clinging to his charge. By rare good fortune, she was not stunned by the shock when they struck the earth, but the outlaw released his clutch. She saw him leap to his feet, and a second later he was battling desperately with one of a dozen savages who sprung out of the shadows on every hand.

For the moment the girl was unobserved, for the one thought of the red-skins was to prevent any of the whites from escaping. Swiftly she crept into the shadow of some rocks close at hand, a point which she reached without attracting attention. Not an instant did she pause there, but crept slowly onward, taking care to screen herself in the deepest darkness to be found. She scarcely dared hope for escape even then, but something spurred her to do her best.

In a few moments she arose to her feet and ran, but she still had the presence of mind enough to keep within the shadows. And in that way she succeeded in escaping, marvelous though it was.

When she comprehended that she had indeed got away, she fell on her knees and offered up a prayer of thankfulness to Heaven. She did not comprehend how desperate her situation still was.

Thoughts of her mother's terrible fate still oppressed her—they were constantly in her mind. She fancied she would be able to find her way back to the cabin, for she did not dream how far from it she was.

Having finished her simple prayer, she arose to her feet and hastened onward again, not knowing whither she went, but trusting to Providence.

For more than an hour she wandered on in that manner. She grew more and more bewildered with each passing moment, and the full sense of her position began to creep upon her.

Many times she paused to listen, but always the silence filled her with terror. How still it was! The moon and the stars poured their white light upon the mountain land, making everything look weird and ghostly. She fancied she was in a land of death—anywhere about there was no living thing but herself. The thought overcame her, and she finally threw herself on the ground, sobbing in terror and despair.

For a long time she lay thus, calling to her mother now and then, but never lifting her head to look around. She did not dare look around. She had always loved the moonlight and the soft breezes of the night, but now the moonlight made her think of a corpse and the breezes seemed to be whispering of some terrible thing.

What was that?

A faint rustle—a soft touch on her shoulder—a low-spoken word!

With a cry of horror, she sprang to her feet and would have fled, but she seemed powerless to do so. It was only with a mighty effort that she turned to confront the person who had come upon her thus, fully expecting to see an Indian.

She was not disappointed. An Indian it was, but one of her own sex. Before her stood a supple and shapely red-skin maiden not far from her own age. Kate was at once struck by the queenly grace and beauty of the bronze maid of the wilds. The moonlight showed every limb was rounded and perfect and she was in the full bloom of fresh maturity. Her face, strange to say, was unusually attractive, having a light of intelligence as well as beauty.

She was dressed in garments of finest fawn-skin, handsomely ornamented with colored quills, shells and beads. Moccasins were on her dainty feet and her long hair floated darkly down her back. She wore a head-dress of feathers, and in one hand she carried a bow. A small quiver of arrows was slung at her back.

Lifting one small hand, she spoke in a tone soft and sweet as the notes of the flute:

"My white sister need have no fear of Silver Tongue; she shall not be harmed."

Those words gained the confidence of the

frightened girl, and Kate's fear was banished in a moment. She felt sure this strangely-beautiful maiden of the wilds did not have a bad heart.

Silver Tongue, as the dusky girl had called herself, advanced slowly till she was close to Kate. Then she paused and looked sharply into the white maiden's face.

"It is good," she said, in her musical voice. "I like the face; Silver Tongue will be the white girl's friend."

Then Kate found her voice.

"Heaven knows I need a friend bad enough!" she sobbed.

"White girl is lost?"

"Yes."

"I knew it. How came she so?"

After a few moments they both sat down on the ground and Kate told her whole pitiful story. Silver Tongue exhibited great interest, uttering several exclamations as the tale progressed. When Kate had finished, she said:

"Soft Foot was too late."

"Soft Foot—who is he? I think I have heard my daddy speak o' sech a person."

"It is possible, for Soft Foot is well known to him. Soft Foot is the father of Silver Tongue; he is a Ute."

This was spoken with an exhibition of pride.

"Then you are shorely my frien'?"

"Yes. Soft Foot overheard the bad white men planning to visit your home and carry you away while your father was in Silver, and he hastened to warn him, having first told me of his intention."

"Then," cried Kate, in sudden excitement, "it may be thet wuz my daddy who heard my cry w'en ther outlaws wuz kerryin' me off! Oh, Heaven! Ef so, I fear both father an' mother are dead!"

It was a terrible thought and filled her with fresh horror. Silver Tongue clasped the white girl in her arms and again did her best to comfort her.

"It is not sure either of them are dead," assured the dusky maid, who spoke English as fluently as did the man she called father. "The mother may only have been wounded and unconscious, and the other may not have been your father."

After a long time she succeeded in calming Kate somewhat; then they discussed what move it was best to make next. Silver Tongue said she had a horse not far away, having come to the mountains to meet Soft Foot. She asked the white maiden to remain in a place of concealment while she went for the animal, and Kate reluctantly consented, Silver Tongue having promised to hasten.

"We will turn toward your home," the dusky maiden said; "for it is there you will be most likely to meet your father."

"But ther outlaws—"

"There will be little chance of finding them there. If they were not exterminated by the Apaches, they are scattered and broken for the present. We need not fear them more."

"Then hurry fer ther hoss. My pore ole mommy—shell we fine her layin' whar thet wretch shot her down?"

Silver Tongue conducted Kate to a place of concealment and cautioned her not to stir for anything, as she would be safe from prying eyes. Then they parted.

It was almost an hour before the Indian maiden returned, and to her amazement she found Kate was not where she left her. The white girl was gone, and, although Silver Tongue searched and called, little Kate was not to be found!

What had happened to her?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECRET PASSAGE.

GERONIMO!

Soft Foot's assertion brought exclamations of surprise from the lips of his two companions, for the crafty head chief of the hostile Apaches had a fearful reputation for craft and cruelty. Was it possible the dreaded warrior had dared approach so close to the settlements and the fort, the soldiers of which were longing to get their hands on the red scourge?

"Are yeou sart'in?" breathlessly asked Old True Blue.

"Soft Foot is not mistaken," replied the Ute.

"Then I cal'late we'd be doin' er big thing fer ther kentry ef we put a bullet threw ther critter!"

"He is under a flag o' truce," observed Zeb.

"Dern that!" burst from the Trusty's lips.

"Ef ole Heronimo wur kilt, I cal'late this trubble would come ter an end tarnal quick."

"But that would seal our doom," said Soft Foot.

"It looks ter me as if aour doom wur dretful nigh sealed neow. They have got us cornered, and when they take er noshun they kin roast us aout in short order."

The Ute did not deny this, for he knew it was true.

Once more the red chief hailed the cabin:

"Has fear frozen the tongues of the white men?" he cried, scornfully.

"Ther derned ole catamaran!" snorted Old True. Then he answered from a loop-hole:

"Not by er good pile! Whut in blue blazes do yeou want?"

"The pale-faces must surrender," was the reply.

"Git out! yeou don't mean it!"

"If they are wise, they will do so at once and not arouse the anger of the red warriors."

"Sho! Yeou make us laff!"

The chief made a gesture of impatience.

"Geronimo has no time to waste in idle talk!"

"Is that so? Waal, then I s'pose yeou are ole Heronimo, him own self?"

"I am the great chief of the Apaches," was the proud retort.

"Waal, that hain't northin' ter boast of. Ther pale-faces have made er rope ter hang yeou with."

The Indian made a gesture of scorn.

"The pale-faces are no match for Geronimo; their rope will rot before it is put to use."

"Yeou may think so, but yeou'll find aout diff'runt, by gosh! I sw'ar yeou have got gall ter come heur so nigh ther fort!"

"What does Geronimo care for the baby warriors of the pale-faces? What do they know of war? The red-men scorn them!"

"Waal, yeou have got us cornered, but we're goin' ter give yeou a merry ole time takin' us. Ef yeou want aour skulps, yeou will have ter 'arn 'em, by gosh!"

"The pale-face talks like a fool!"

That made Old True mad.

"Mebbe I do!" he blurted; "but I 'dwise' yeou ter git back aout er reach of my guns ef yeou want ter continer ter squarm raound over this mundane spear. I don't take sass frum no dirty son of a gun like yeou, by thutter! Jest yeou git ef yeou don't want ter be perforated, rag ur no rag!"

But Geronimo said:

"There is a beautiful white maiden in the cabin of the pale-faces. If they will give her up, the red warriors may go away without molesting them."

The three men within the hut were filled with astonishment. How came it that Geronimo knew of Zeb Horn's daughter?

"Derned ef thet hain't sing'ler!" muttered the old fortune-hunter, who had been listening to the conversation. "He must mean my leetle gal!"

The Ute said nothing.

"That's jest who he means," asserted Old Truman. "Haow do they know of her?"

That was a question they could not answer.

Suddenly Soft Foot spoke:

"Let the Apache dog think the white maiden is here. It is best."

Although Old True did not exactly see the point just then, he knew Soft Foot seldom made an error, so he cried:

"Whut do yeou want of ther white maiden, smoky-skin?"

"One of my chiefs has looked on her and seen she is fair," was the reply. "He would take her to his wigwam."

"Waal, he won't take her yiterwhile, by 'tarnal! We will defend her as long as we kin pull trigger."

"That will be the destroying of you all."

"Oh, fush! This cabing is a purty good fort, an' I cal'late we kin make it warm fer yeou an' yeour critters."

"The pale-face shall regret his folly!"

"Waal, ef you don't git aout of range of my gun, you'll never live ter regret any darned thing! My finger is jest itchin' ter pull trigger. Git, consarn ye, git!"

The chief did not attempt to parley longer, but walked back to his warriors.

"Neow we'll have ter fight like all possessed!" exclaimed the Trusty. "They'll come for us 'fore shortly, an' then we must make ev'ry shot caount. We'll try ter send er few ter ther lan' of never-come-back b'fore they rub us aout."

Old Zeb was seated in a chair, groaning softly. Noticing this, True asked:

"Whut's ther matter, pard?"

"It's my head," was the reply. "Seems like it w'd split."

"Waal, I don't wonder. Yeou got rubbed mighty hard by er bullet, an' it hain't bin done up a tall, fer yeou w'u'dn't keep quiet long enough fer us ter tend ter it. Better put some watter on it an' tie er hankerfist raound yer head. I'd look arter it, but I dassent take my lookers offen these red skunks."

Zeb took Old True's advice, and when he had bound a wet cloth about his throbbing head he felt much better. Then he picked up his rifle and again took his stand at one of the loopholes.

The Indians held a long consultation, seeming to earnestly discuss some point. Soft Foot explained they were divided into two parties, one of which favored firing the cabin and burning the whites out, while the other wished to take the place by storm and capture all within.

"Ef they decide ter burn us aout we sha'n't have much of a show," observed Old True.

Zeb said nothing, but he did not seem greatly alarmed. It appeared as if his sense of the danger they were in was blunted by the terrible misfortune that had befallen him. Death seemed to have no terror for him.

"I'd jest like ter git er crack at ole Heronimo," declared True.

Finally the savages seemed to arrive at a decision, for they uttered a chorus of yells.

"Which is it?" asked the Trusty of their Ute companion.

"Fight!" was his curt reply.

"Waal, they shall git their stummicks full, by smoke!"

The attack was soon made, and the defenders of the cabin dropped two or three of the warriors at the first charge. The Apaches were repulsed, and another long consultation followed.

"Whoop!" shouted Old Ballou. "I spotted one of ther critters! I cal'late they'll conclude it hain't no picnic takin' this fortyficashun. Ef it wur an ekil chaine, I'd think this wur a reg'ler circus. I do enjoy er leetle hurl whar ther fur jest literally flies!"

"They may take to fire next," spoke Soft Foot. "Then there will be no chance for us but to rush out and be shot down."

All at once Zeb broke in:

"Don't git down-hearted, pards. Them var-mints hain't goin' ter take our ha'r ter-night, you heur me?"

He spoke as if he felt certain of the result.

"Whut do ye mean?" asked True.

"Jest w'at I said."

"But haow are we goin' ter 'scape 'em?"

"I know er way."

"Sav, pard, yeou hain't foolin'?"

"W'u'd I be ap' ter fool at sech er time?"

"Most likely not; but I don't understan' haow we are goin' ter git erway frum ther red sarnips."

Zeb advanced to the middle of the floor, where he seized an iron ring and lifted a trap-door. The moonlight which streamed in at the window revealed his movements to his companions.

"W'en ther time comes, we will 'scape this yar way," he declared.

"Inter ther cellar?"

"Yep."

"Then we'd be wuss off than we'd be ter stay an' fight ter ther last gasp."

"Nary time. You jest trust ter me, an' I'll guarantee thet thar don't no 'Pache finger yer ha'r ter-night."

"That settles it."

Hope revived in the breasts of the fortune-hunter's two companions, and Old True declared he felt a "'tarnal sight more scrumshus."

After a long consultation, the Indians began yelling again and rushing about. The defenders of the cabin fired several shots at the dancing gang, one of which sent a warrior rolling on the grass, and drew howls of fury from his comrades.

Soon, however, the heavy tree was discovered, and the red-skins made a charge upon the cabin door.

"Hyer they come with er batterin'-ram!" cried Zeb. "This is our las' chance ter give 'em fits!"

"Pump it ter ther imps!" shouted Old True.

The three defenders did so, and more than one savage rolled on the ground. But the charge was not checked, and the heavy timber crashed against the door.

"I don't reckon we hev got any more time ter fool round hyer," said Zeb. "Git down through ther trap both o' ye, an' I'll close it arter us."

Old True led the way, descending a flight of steps, and Soft Foot followed. Zeb came last, and carefully let down the trap door.

The three men found themselves in the utter darkness of the cellar, and Zeb spoke in a cautious tone:

"Keep cool w'ile I strike er match."

The shocks of the heavy timber was making the cabin tremble above their heads, and, had not the door been fastened with heavy bars, the Indians would have had little trouble in forcing an entrance. As it was, the trio knew the door could stand but a few seconds longer.

Zeb struck the match, but it seemed hours to the impatient three before the flame was sufficient to reveal their surroundings. When it did so, it showed they were in a very small cellar, at one side of which seemed a solid wall of rock.

The owner of the cabin drew his knife, advanced to the wall and thrust the blade into a narrow crack in the rock.

Almost instantly a square portion of the apparently solid wall slid silently back from view, leaving a black opening revealed to the astonished gaze of Zeb's companions.

Then the match suddenly went out, leaving them in blank darkness.

At the same instant they heard the cabin door go down with a great crash, and the yelling warriors poured into the room over their heads!

"Quick!" hissed Zeb. "No time ter light another match! In with ye!"

His companions heard and understood. No time was lost in obeying. Zeb followed, taking care to work the cunning machinery that governed the movements of the rocky door so the barrier slid gently back into place.

When the Indians descended into the cellar, they would find it deserted.

Zeb Horn had spent many an odd hour of toil in perfecting the working of that rocky door,

thinking it might some day be to his advantage, and he had not labored in vain. The cunning arrangement had saved the lives of himself and his companions.

Along the passage they crept on their hands and knees until they came to a place where they were able to arise to their feet. Then Zeb led the way.

At length, he halted, saying:

"You are now in my mine. I don't reckon ther critters'll take it inter their noddles ter 'vestigate this yar place, but ef they do, I know whar we kin hide from 'em."

After a few moments, he led them close to the opening of the drift, from which position they could watch the movements of the puzzled savages. They saw all that passed beneath the light of the moon, and Soft Foot actually laughed with satisfaction.

"They think the Evil Spirit helped us to escape them," he explained, after the Apaches had held a long consultation. "They are filled with wonder and fear. We are safe. They will soon depart."

He spoke the truth.

"Thar they go!" Zeb finally exclaimed.

"An' thar goes aour hosses!" regretfully groaned Old True Blue.

"Soft Foot will follow them," asserted the Ute. "He will recover the horses."

He kept his word. Within ten hours he restored the animals to their proper owners, having cut them out from under the very noses of the cunning Apaches!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GAMBLER'S GAME BLOCKED.

Two days after his encounter with Hurricane Hal in Silver City, Lieutenant Cranston and the soldiers under his command were on scouting duty in Arizona, near the point where the San Francisco empties into the Gila. The lieutenant had been sent out to investigate the reports that Geronimo had been doing red work in that vicinity.

The Blue Coats were riding along a wooded defile when, of a sudden, they were startled by a faint cry for help. Instantly they drew rein, but were unable to determine from which direction the cry came.

"It was that of a woman!" asserted one.

"It may be a red-skin trick," said another.

Lieutenant Cranston himself fancied the cry was that of a female, and he ordered it answered. Still no sound came in response to the shout sent up.

"I reckon it was the cry of a wild animal," one of the soldiers said.

The lieutenant was about to order them on when an old fellow saluted, asserting:

"I think that was a female, lieutenant, and I believe I know from what point the cry came."

"You have leave to discover if you are right," said the young officer. "Be as swift about it as possible, sir."

"I will, sir."

With another salute, the man slipped from his horse, drew his revolver, and plunged into the thicket at the left. He did not advance but a short distance before he came upon a small opening, in the center of which were two horses and three human beings, one of whom was a female.

At a glance, the soldier saw one of the men was holding both horses by their noses, as if to prevent their neighing, while the other fellow had the girl clasped in his arms and was pressing a hand over her mouth.

"Hello, there!" cried the soldier, boldly advancing into the opening, his revolver half lifted. "What does this mean, I would like to know?"

The man who was holding the girl uttered an exclamation that had the flavor of an imprecation, and the other released one of the horses to grasp a weapon. But the soldier lifted his ready revolver, promptly commanding:

"Hands empty, you! You will surely chew lead if you try it on!"

The man who held the girl spoke a few low words to his companion, and the fellow relinquished his attempt to draw a weapon. Then the one with the girl asked:

"Who are you?"

"I am one of Uncle Sam's boys, and there are thirty of my comrades within call."

"Soldiers?"

"Yes."

"By Jove, what luck!" cried the man. "We thought you were Apaches, and we dodged in here to escape you. We are in good fortune, this time, sure enough!"

But he scarcely seemed sincere when he uttered the words.

"If you took us for reds, you made a big mistake," nodded the soldier, still keeping his revolver ready for use. "We thought we heard a woman's cry for help."

"It was this young lady here; she was overcome with terror, and scarcely knew what she did. I was forced to place my hand over her mouth to keep her from calling again, for she seemed to have quite lost her reason."

Then he spoke a few hasty words to the girl, taking care to lower his voice so the soldier

could not understand what he said, and not till then did he remove his hand from her mouth.

A few moments later the soldier emerged from the thicket, followed by the two men, the girl and the horses. Lieutenant Cranston uttered an exclamation as his eyes fell on the two men, for he instantly recognized them as the ones who had been urging the Silver City mob to do injury to the Ute, Soft Foot!

They were Sleek Saul, the gambler, and his ruffianly tool, Boss Brule, the Bruiser.

And the young girl was none other than Kate Horn!

The lieutenant at once saw the girl was young and handsome, although she was very pale and haggard in appearance, her golden hair hanging in a disheveled condition down her back. There was something about her beseeching eyes that at once touched the gallant young officer to the heart.

Sleek Saul had a very smooth story to tell about being flying to escape the hostiles and finding the girl hidden in the mountains. During the entire narration the lieutenant watched first the face of the speaker then that of the girl, and when it was finished, he felt sure the card-sharp had not told the whole truth.

Still the girl denied nothing.

Boss Brule had very little to say.

Seeing the girl was nearly exhausted and in great need of rest, the officer ordered a halt at the first available camping place, and such a place was soon found.

As soon as the lieutenant's tent was pitched, he made a request that the young lady should be brought thither. Sleek Saul came with her, seeming inclined to remain when the officer had dismissed him with a few words.

"I wish to speak with the young lady alone," said Cranston, coldly.

"She is in my charge at present," declared the card-sharp.

The lieutenant wheeled on the sport.

"You are in my camp, sir," he flashed, his face becoming warm. "I have taken charge of the young lady."

"By what right?"

"By the right she has given me."

Sleek Saul looked amazed.

"I have been with her since you saw her first, and I have not heard her say anything that you could construe to have such a meaning."

"Words were not necessary, sir."

"Ah?"

"No; her eyes spoke enough. You may go now."

The gambler started to leave the tent, then turned to cast a warning look toward Kate. In an instant Cranston confronted him, and the young officer's eyes fairly flashed.

"I understand the threat of that look!" he cried. "I understand you wish to intimidate this girl so she will not tell the truth! I can read you for what you are worth! You are a rascal, sir!"

Sleek Saul lifted his eyebrows, his face of ice showing amusement, if anything.

"It strikes me you are a trifle too large for your clothes," he sneered.

Cranston pulled back the flap of the tent, pointing toward the opening with his free hand.

"Get out!" he shouted. "In another moment I shall call an orderly to kick you out! Not another word, sir, I will not stand it!"

The gambler smiled again in his cold fashion, bowed, rubbed his slim fingers together as if washing them, then backed from the tent.

As the lieutenant dropped the flap and turned back, Kate cried with relief:

"Oh, I am so glad he is gone!"

CHAPTER XV.

"HIS LIFE IS MINE."

It was not long before Lieutenant Cranston was listening to the unfortunate girl's story. He had already been attracted by the peculiar charm of her appearance, and he became more and more interested in her as she talked.

She was seated on a blanket which the officer had caused to be spread in the tent, while he sat on the soft grass a few feet away.

She told the whole pitiful story, the greater portion of which is already known to the reader. She shed no tears, but there was a quivering of the chin and a tremor in her voice that touched the gallant young lieutenant to the heart. She was past tears, for her eyes were still red with weeping.

She stated that after Silver Tongue left her in the place of concealment while she went for her horse, the minutes seemed like hours. She had waited and waited till it seemed as if the night must be well spent, but she looked in vain for the Indian maiden. In truth the time had not been very long, but in her excited and unstrung condition it seemed tedious.

At length she had heard the tramp of hoofs, and a glad cry broke from her lips before she thought what the result might be. She believed Silver Tongue was returning at last, and so she stepped from her place of concealment. To her horror, two horsemen rode into view.

At first she thought of flight, but on casting a second look at the horsemen, she saw they

were white men and their faces were not hidden by masks like those worn by Red Hand and his followers. Then they must be friends.

They spoke to her, expressing surprise and asking how she came there. In a short time she was telling her story, and Sleek Saul expressed both surprise and indignation, declaring Red Hand merited the most ignominious death.

Then the smooth-tongued gambler told her the red-skins were so thick between them and Silver that it would be folly to turn in that direction, but said he knew of a safe retreat away to the westward. He declared he knew her father and said she should soon see him if she would trust in him. He wished her to go with them at once, and when she said she must wait for Silver Tongue, he declared the Indian girl had deceived her—was not a Ute, but was an Apache and had gone to bring her people to murder the white maiden.

After what she had passed through, it is little wonder the unfortunate girl was easily deceived, for the gambler was a good talker and he made his statements seem most plausible. She decided to trust in him, and he swore she should not regret it.

Sleek Saul and Boss Brule were on their way to Arizona. The card-sharp gave Kate a place on his horse, and they hastened on, fearing detection by the red-skins.

By morning Kate began to think all was not right, but when she expressed her suspicion, the smooth-tongued gamester was ready with more lies, and again she was deceived for a time.

Noon came, the day passed, another night fell. By this time the poor girl knew she had fallen into the hands of two villains, but she dared not let them suspect she had arrived at such a decision, for she thought they might treat her well for a time if they thought they were deceiving her. In that she was right.

The night passed. Their provisions were low, but in the morning Brule succeeded in shooting some sage-hens, which were roasted over glowing coals, even though they knew how dangerous it was to light a fire.

Kate declined to eat, her heart being crushed by despair, but Saul finally induced her to partake of a small amount. Of course that helped to keep up her strength. At noon they ate the last of the dried meat which the two men had possessed when they came upon the girl. Saul expected to reach a lonely camp by midnight, a fact which the girl heard him express to Brule.

Late in the afternoon they had espied the soldiers and had taken refuge where they were found, telling the girl a band of Apaches were approaching. But she had seen the Blue Coats, although she did not let them become aware of the fact, and she resolved to make a desperate attempt to escape from the clutches of the men who she knew meant her no good. So she had shouted for help when she heard the sound of the horses' hoofs as the detachment were passing in the wooded defile. Sleek Saul had at once covered her mouth, threatening to choke her if she cried out again, saying she would be the death of them all.

"But oh, I wuz the most skeerd o' t'other one!" she declared. "I wuz skeerd o' him all ther time, fer he w'd look at me in sech a way that it made my blood run cold. I know he meant ter hurt me somehow!"

"But they did not—either of them did not dare harm you?" exclaimed Cranston, excitedly. "Tell me the truth! If they have harmed you, their lives shall pay the penalty!"

"No, they hed not done so, but I w'dn't stay with them ergain like thet fer all ther worl!"

"The curs!" fumed the lieutenant, being more than ever interested in the girl. "Anyway, I will put them under arrest. They are ruffians!"

"I am afraid the cold-faced one will kill me ef you do anythin' ter him!"

"You need not be afraid; I will protect you, Miss Horn. He will scarcely get what he deserves. I will see to it that you are restored to your father. It is plain I have overreached in looking for the red-skins; they were nearer the fort than I dreamed.

"But you must have rest, for it is plain you are nearly exhausted. This tent and everything in it is yours; no one shall intrude upon you. Food shall be sent you at once, then you must try to get some sleep."

"How long will ye stay hyer?"

"Till to-morrow morning."

"An' then—"

"And then we shall turn back toward the fort. I promise you shall be restored to your father as soon as possible."

"An' I thank ye fer yer kindness," she said, simply. "I won't fergit it soon."

Cranston flushed with pleasure, congratulating himself on the impression he had made. He was not such a very bad fellow, but one of his weaknesses was a great fondness for the gentler sex.

"I will now see that those two rascals are placed under arrest," he said, as he arose.

Gracefully lifting his hat, he bowed himself out of the tent.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, speaking softly to himself. "She would be a beauty under favor-

able circumstances. It is plain she has no education."

Cranston at once ordered the arrest of Sleek Sam and Boss Brule. The gambler protested, but that made no difference, and he soon found himself in custody.

Within the hour two more men appeared in the camp. They proved to be the cowboy pards, Hurricane Hal and Maverick Mat. Almost the first person Hal saw was the gambler, Sleek Saul, and a cry of triumph broke from his lips.

"Found again!"

But when he attempted to advance upon the card-sharp, he found himself confronted by the soldiers. Lieutenant Cranston was soon on the spot.

"Stand aside!" cried Hal, trembling with excitement. "Let me get at that man!"

"Look here!" came sternly from the lieutenant's lips; "you are in a military camp, and that man is under arrest. We are bound to protect him till he is released."

"Nothing can keep me from him!" shouted Hal. "All I ask is to meet him on an equal footing, man to man."

"Even that is too much now."

"Too much! Gods! That man murdered my poor mother! His life is mine!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GAMBLER'S EXIT.

"No matter what this man has done to you," said the lieutenant, calmly, "you should have judgment enough to know it is impossible for me to allow you to touch him while he is in my charge."

"Why impossible?"

"Such a thing would be sure to cost me dear."

"Then you mean to place yourself between me and that double-dyed dastard?"

"If necessary, yes."

The cowboy's black eyes flashed fire and his hands grasped his revolvers.

"You cannot stop me!" he cried. "If necessary, I will shoot my way to him!"

At a word of command from the lieutenant, a dozen men placed themselves between the furious cattleman and the gambler.

"I trust you will have reason enough to see the folly of your threatened move," said Cranston. "I shall defend this man to the last."

Hal made a gesture of fury, his eyes glowing like hot coals as they turned on the officer.

"I believe you are in league with the wretch!" he fumed, his judgment quite deserting him for the time. "It makes no difference. My weapons shall open a road to him, and all I ask is that you attempt to block the way!"

Having lost his head, Hurricane Hal would have opened on the soldiers in another moment, but Maverick Mat, who had been standing quietly at one side, saw the time had come to interfere. With a stride he was at his pard's elbow, and his grasp fell on Hal's wrist.

"Slow and easy, pard!" came from his mustache-shaded lips. "You seem to have cast your good judgment to the winds. Are you mad?"

Hurricane Hal's gleaming eyes met the blue orbs of his comrade, and he hoarsely cried:

"You too! My God! Would you attempt to balk me now? Don't do it, Mat—for Heaven's sake, do not get in my path now! You know how long I have trailed this devil—you know how many times he has given me the slip! With half an opportunity, he will get away again! If I delay, I shall surely lose my revenge! I am not asking too much! I do not ask you to aid me in getting at this villain! You need put your life in no danger! I cannot stand defeat again! I swore above the dead body of my mother that I would know no rest till I saw Rebal Raguel lying dead at my feet. I will keep that oath if—"

"You know I will do anything reasonable to aid you in keeping your oath, Hal; but when you act like a person deranged, then I feel it is my duty to interfere."

"Have I not good reason to be deranged on one point at least? This is—"

"You must see your own folly," Mat broke in, not daring allow the excited fellow to continue, fearing he would work himself up to such a pitch that he would entirely lose his head.

"Do you want to lose all chance of ever obtaining the vengeance you seek?"

"No; and that is why I am determined to get at the wretch now."

"But you cannot get at him now. If you forced them to it, these soldiers would defend him to the end—and the end would mean your death as surely as you used your guns. Right or wrong, things are against you now, and you must submit for the time. It is better to wait still longer than to dash in now and lose your life while your enemy lives to laugh over your grave. Listen to reason and have a little sense, pard."

Hal's white teeth gleamed through his dark mustache, and his eyes turned from the speaker to Lieutenant Cranston.

"You have seen fit to stand in my path," he said, with forced calmness. "You know the crime with which yonder cold-faced devil is

charged, yet you will protect him! I will not forget it! Enemies you are determined we shall be, and it shall be as you choose. If this villain escapes, I will hold you responsible! You are—"

"Silence!" commanded the lieutenant, his face flushing angrily. "I have heard enough of your threats! This is my camp, and I will stand no more. Another word, I and will put you under arrest!"

Once more the hot blood of the cowboy went leaping through his veins, but now he longed to spring at the officer. But for the restraining hand of his comrade, he might have done so. As it was, Mat could not govern his pard's tongue, and Hal flashed:

"And so you threaten me with arrest! That is indeed the last straw! Let me tell you something: *You have not enough men to arrest me!*"

That was more than the lieutenant could stand. In a moment he had ordered the fiery cattleman's arrest. Several men moved forward to obey the command, but Hal flashed a pair of heavy revolvers in their faces, crying sharply:

"Come on if you want to, but you come to death!"

Maverick Mat saw the time had come for him to take a hand, and his revolvers appeared. Some of the soldiers would have stolen up behind Hal, but the cowboy pards placed themselves back to back in a defensive attitude, their weapons ready for use.

"I reckon you blue-coaters had better go a little slow," observed Mat, coolly. "If you crowd us and we h'ist on steam, there will be a regular ole he-howling time here, and you can bet your boots on *that!* You have not enough men to arrest us!"

There was something about his placid manner that convinced Cranston he spoke no more than the truth. He was not hot-headed, like his companion, but he would fight to the last gasp if forced to do so.

Cranston saw the folly of hurling his men on the two defiant cowboys, well knowing the cattlemen could work their revolvers with marvelous rapidity and accuracy, but just how to retreat gracefully was what puzzled him. Finding something must be done, he ordered them out of the camp.

"You are intruders here, anyway," he cried. "I will give you just three minutes to get out."

"I will not go!" Hal declared; but Mat thought that the best thing they could do just then.

"We will go on one condition," he said.

But Cranston would make no conditions. Having discovered this, Mat endeavored to persuade Hal to leave the camp with him.

"I will not lose sight of Rebel Raguel again!" asserted the avenger.

"We can place ourselves so he cannot give us the slip," declared Mat; and then he explained there were but two ways of reaching the spot and they could guard both ways.

Finally, with a gesture of despair, Hal allowed his friend to persuade him, and a few moments later the cowboys rode from the camp.

Through all this scene Sleek Saul had looked calmly on, his cold face expressing emotion of no kind until the cowboys turned away. Then an icy smile caused his teeth to gleam out for a moment.

The lieutenant saw that smile, and it angered him. When the cowboys had passed beyond ear-shot, he strode up to the prisoner.

"You may thank your good fortune you were under arrest!" he said. "But for that, you would have been obliged to meet that fellow who is thirsting for your blood."

Sleek Saul drew forth a cigar case, opened it and held it toward the officer, but Cranston declined with a gesture of disdain. The gambler deliberately selected a weed, clipped the end with his white teeth, then spoke:

"May I trouble you for a match?" he said.

The lieutenant had been nervously biting his lip, and now his face flushed, for it seemed as if the card-sharp had struck him with an open hand.

"I have no matches," he retorted, controlling himself with a great effort.

"So sorry," yawned Saul. Then he turned to Boss Brule, saying:

"I am in need of a match, pard."

"Wal, I allus lugs a supply," answered the Bruiser, as he produced a metallic case and tossed it to the gambler. "Hyer ye has 'em."

Sleek Saul was very deliberate in selecting a match, closing the case, tossing it back to Brule and then lighting the cigar. Having done this, he took it from his mouth and glanced at the burning end to make sure it was evenly lighted.

"A delightful weed," he observed. "You know not what you are missing, lieutenant."

"I know you ought to be in irons!" exclaimed Cranston, still having to struggle with his anger.

"I almost regret I did not turn you over to that cowboy. He would have made short work of you."

"You seem to be sure of that, but in truth it was a most fortunate thing for him. He was excited; I am as cool as you please. He would not have been able to hit me at ten paces, but I would have sent a bullet crashing through his

brain. Lieutenant, you actually saved the fellow's life."

"Possibly so; but I have no doubt you well deserve death at his hands. He claims you murdered his mother."

"That is an error."

"I believe it is the truth."

"Then it is useless to discuss the matter. I have no way of convincing you you are wrong, and it would do me no good to convince you. You have placed me under arrest, as you call it, but for what reason I cannot understand. I have done nothing—"

"There, that will do! You need not protest your innocence. I have listened to Miss Horn's story, and you did not deceive her, although you fancied you did. You carried her into Arizona on the false pretense of taking her to a place of safety."

"You may call it a false pretense, but surely she was not in a place of safety when I found her. The Apaches were thick as flies in that section."

"Which is a statement I am inclined to doubt. I have been looking for the work of the hostiles, and all I have found seems to have come from the hand of the Mimbres outlaw. I fancy Red Hand is responsible for most of the work which is charged to the Apaches in this section."

Cranston fancied a singular look passed over the gambler's face, but he did not understand its meaning.

Night came on.

Camp-fires were not built, for the little band well understood how sharp were the eyes of the Apaches, and should there be any of the reds in that section, they would be simply advertising their presence by building a fire.

Double sentries were posted, and two men were detached to guard the prisoners.

Sleek Saul had determined to make a desperate break for liberty that night, and he succeeded in secretly letting Boss Brule know his intention. He had been disarmed of all visible weapons, but he had a pair of derringers concealed in his sleeves, and he would use them, if necessary.

Whether or not the guard became careless, Saul found the opportunity for which he was looking. It was near midnight when the camp was aroused by two pistol-shots. In a moment the soldiers grasped their weapons and leaped to their feet. They were just in time to see their horses go dashing off down the defile, every animal being cut loose and stampeded by two riders who yelled like madmen in their rear.

The soldiers fancied for a few moments it was the work of reds, and they fully expected an attack. The sentinels attempted to check the stampede, but the effort was useless. Away down the defile tore the horses, with two yelling men urging them on.

A single cowboy attempted to hold the pass. It was Hurricane Hal, and when he failed, he fired at the screaming men who were driving the horses on.

One of them threw up his arms and tumbled headlong to the ground!

The cowboys rushed to his side, and found him trying to struggle to his feet, having been wounded in a far from fatal manner. Hal seized him by the shoulder and glared into his face, being able to discern the features, although the moonlight did not touch that spot.

A cry of fury and despair broke from the avenger's lips, for he saw the wounded man was Boss Brule.

Sleek Saul had got safely away!

CHAPTER XVII.

A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW.

WITH that cry of despair still on his lips, Hurricane Hal leaped toward a point that lay in the deeper shadows. For a moment he disappeared, then a horse came leaping out with the young cattleman seated in the saddle on its back.

"On, Dandy, on!" he shouted. "The most slippery devil alive is escaping us! You must overtake him, old horse, for I fear I shall go mad if you do not!"

The stampeded horses and the flying villain had passed out of sight, but the pursuer was guided by sound.

The chase did not prove a long one, but when he overtook the horses another cry was wrung from his lips.

Sleek Saul was not with them!

The gambler had managed to draw aside and allow the pursuing cowboy to pass.

"Great heavens!" groaned Hal, as he realized he had been tricked again. "This is a bitter pill to swallow!"

For a time he was so filled with despair that he could do nothing at all but keep along with the horses. He knew now that the card-sharp had surely succeeded in completely giving him the slip for the time.

After a while he decided to gain control of the horses, and he placed himself at their head for that purpose. With the skill of one well up in the cattle business, he quieted the frightened animals and brought them to a halt. Then, with his lasso, he secured them all together and turned back toward the soldiers' camp.

In truth he scarcely knew what he was

doing, and acted from instinct as much as anything else. It had become natural for him to gain control of frightened animals whenever the opportunity presented.

Hal had not ridden far on the back trail before he was joined by his pard. A few words sufficed to inform Mat of his wretched failure, and they rode back in silence.

Cranston was amazed when the two cowboys came riding into camp with the stampeded animals and turned them over to him.

Hurricane Hal leaped to the ground and confronted the young officer.

"Do you know what you have done?" demanded the cowboy, speaking in a manner that told he was holding himself in control.

"I have done nothing," was the officer's reply. "The guard permitted our prisoners to escape, but he paid for his carelessness with his life, for he has a bullet in his brain."

"If you had given me the simple justice I asked—if you had permitted me to meet that man face to face, armed as he was armed, your man would be alive now, and I would not be cheated of my vengeance for the time. You are to blame for what has taken place, and but for the fact that I believe you thought yourself doing your duty, I would call you to an account. As it is, I will warn you never to place yourself in my path again, for if you stand between me and that man, whose life is mine, *I will kill you!*"

The fiery words came hissing from Hurricane Hal's lips, but Cranston did not quail.

"It is useless to reason with you," he said, "for you are in no condition to listen to reason."

"Did you know the man you kept from my vengeance?"

"No."

"I thought not. He is Red Hand, the Marauder!"

"What?"

The lieutenant nearly fell over backward, so great was his astonishment.

"That wretch was Red Hand," repeated Hal.

"Impossible!"

"It is true."

"How do you know this?"

"I have no time to explain *how* I know; it is sufficient that I *do* know."

"But, great heavens! why did you not tell me when he was in my power? I would have had him ironed and under double guard! But, you must be mistaken! It is impossible that that was the dreaded Scourge of the Mimbres!"

"You are at liberty to think so if you wish. It makes no difference to me *what* you think. The man who murdered my mother is now known as Red Hand, and that dastard was the murderer!"

The lieutenant turned to Mat for a confirmation of the assertion, and the blonde cowboy assured him he believed it correct.

Cranston was filled with rage and chagrin. He blamed the cowboys for not telling him of the man's identity, but they did not stop to listen to him. Turning, they rode out of the camp and disappeared in the darkness of the shadowy defile.

Boss Brule had succeeded in stealing away after Hal left him, so it was plain that he had not been very badly wounded.

Kate Horn had been aroused by the exciting sounds, and after the departure of the cowboys, the lieutenant found her crouching in front of the tent, pale and trembling.

"I'm so glad ye hev come!" she cried, as she saw him. "W'at is it all erbout? I didn't uster be skeered so easy, sir, but sence—sence—" She broke down, being unable to speak of her mother's fate.

"It is too bad!" declared the young officer. "I should have come to you before, but I found it impossible. There is no danger now, for everything is all over. The smooth-faced man with whom you were found last night has escaped, having shot and instantly killed one of my men."

An exclamation of horror came from the girl's lips.

"Oh, ther wretch!" she cried. "W'at a wicked critter he mus' be!"

"I hardly think you know how bad he is. Miss Horn, I congratulate you on your escape."

"My escape!"

"Yes, from him. He is Red Hand, the Marauder."

Kate had heard enough of Red Hand before he had visited her humble mountain home. That he was a human monster she well knew, for he had shot down her mother before her own eyes. Could it be possible the man in whose company she had spent so many hours was Red Hand himself? The thought filled her with horror. Fortunately indeed had been her escape from the wretch.

"Oh, sir!" she cried. "Ef I'd 'a' knowed it, I'd 'a' gone crazy! I'll never fergit ye fer savin' me—never, never!"

She laid her hands earnestly on his, and he was thrilled by her warm touch. More than before he felt she would be a peerless beauty under advantageous circumstances.

"What a pity she has not an education!" he thought. "Then she would make some man a

fine wife. By Jove! I really believe I might fall in love with her myself! As it is—oh, well! I really would not consider the thought of marrying such an ignorant creature."

Nevertheless, the lieutenant was hard hit, a fact he could not conceal from himself.

In further conversation with Kate he learned she had slept since nightfall till aroused by the sounds of the stampede, although her slumber had been far from dreamless. Still she was much rested and refreshed, and when he spoke of moving, she was eager to do so, feeling they would be hastening toward her father, a re-union with whom she looked forward to.

Since Hal had declared the escaped gambler was Red Hand, the lieutenant had been growing more and more nervous with each passing minute. He well knew what a daring and desperate wretch the Marauder was, and he fancied the outlaw might take a fancy to gather his lawless followers and return for the maiden, whom he plainly considered a prize worth possessing. If Red Hand did that, he might find some way to outwit the Blue-Coats, and again possess the maiden.

Of course he did not express his fears to Kate, but finding her eager to move, he soon decided to break camp at once. By morning they would be well over the line into New Mexico.

His orders were soon given, and the sound of the bugle awoke the camp. Little time was lost, and within thirty minutes the party was ready to move.

It was near mid-day when they camped amid the mountains beyond the New Mexico line. Barely had they halted when two horsemen appeared, one of whom Kate recognized at a distance.

It was her father, and his companion was Old True Blue!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TWO AVENGERS.

BACK to Hidden Pocket the soldiers escorted the three, Old True, Zeb and Kate. Cranston was as kind and considerate as possible, which was appreciated by the old fortune-seeker; but it was not on Zeb's account the lieutenant put himself out so much.

Old True Blue saw how the land lay, and he shook his head soberly.

"I don't like ter look of that," he muttered. "Ther gal hain't got no eddycashun, an' it hain't more'n hafe likely he keers in 'arnest fer ther leetle gal. Not that she hain't good enough fer him, fer I callate she's good enough fer ther best man that ever chawed fodder; but ther leutenant's er prauod sprig, and he feels his own 'portance about as much as he'd oughter. He'd be shore ter think he wur lower-in' nim own self ter marry sech a gal. Bless her heart! she's good as a queen!"

Kate told her father her adventures, and the old man fairly broke down as she related the portion where his wife had spoken of her terrible dream. When she told how the Marauder shot the poor woman down, Zeb listened in silence, only the working of his face and the blazing light in his eyes telling how he was affected.

"I thort likely she wuz—wuz killed," he finally said, with a great effort. "We saw—blood—on ther—floor, an' we looked fer her body; but we didn't fine it. We'll fine it arter we git back."

And that was the first thing to which he turned his attention after Hidden Pocket was reached and the soldiers had taken their departure, Old True Blue going with them, but promising to return within three days.

Zeb had sent Truman on ahead when the cabin was approached, and the old man washed the blood-stain from the floor, for such a sight should not greet the eyes of little Kate the moment she crossed the threshold of her old home.

It is impossible to describe the girl's feelings as she entered the cabin where she had passed so many happy hours and where she saw her dear mother shot down by the hand of a brute.

When the soldiers had departed, Zeb set about repairing the broken door, in a few hours making it as strong as before. Kate watched him in silence.

"Are we goin' ter live hyer now, daddy?" she asked, finally.

He started.

"Wal, I dunno," came slowly from his lips.

"It's so lonely hyer now!"

"Wal, I 'low it don't seem ther same, leetle 'un."

"Let's go 'way, daddy."

"But—but ther mine?"

"Let ther mine go, daddy. It hain't never paid ye fer yer hard work."

"But ther gold is *thar*, child."

"You hain't sure o' thet."

"Oh, yes I be! It is a true lead."

"Wal, w'at do we keer fer it now thet mommy is gone? Thar hain't nuthin' in all ther worl' I keer fer now!"

Zeb gently stroked her sunny head, saying softly:

"Pore leetle gal! pore leetle gal!"

He sat down in the doorway, and she sat on the step, laying her head against his knee and gazing away toward the rugged eastern peaks. It was nearing evening, and a great silence rested in the pocket.

"I don't like ter stay hyer now," Kate murmured at length.

He did not ask her why, but she finally continued:

"Ev'rythin' keeps me thinkin' o' mommy an' how she talked ter me jest afore thet wretched critter came. Daddy, she wuz shore she wuzn't goin' ter live—pore ole mommy! An' I felt so, too, arter she tole me o' her dreams an' I 'membered mine. Do you s'pose her sperrit'll ever come back hyer?"

Zeb shook his head.

"I don't take no stock in sperrits, Kitty," he declared. "Yer mommy wuz er good woman, an' I 'low if thar is ary Heaven, she went straight thar. But I reckon no sperrits ever come back from thet place an' visit this ole yearth ag'in. I hev heard heaps 'bout sech things, but I never tuck no stock in 'em. It is all wiind an' no truth."

"Mebbe so; but I shell allus feel like mommy might come back hyer. Not thet I'd be skeered o' her ef she did come—I don't think I w'd. It hain't thet so much as it is ther loneliness o' ther place thet makes me want ter leave it."

"Whar w'd ye go?"

"Oh, dunno—anywhar."

"Ther worl' is powerful large, leetle 'un."

Kate sighed.

"I s'pose so."

"You hev never seen much o' anythin' but ther wu'st part o' it. I wuz allus plannin' on git-tin' mighty rich an' lettin' ye see it fer w'at it is wu'th. I reckon I hev bin an ole fool, fer I hev hed er leetle pile in my time; but I wanted more, an' thet ruined me. Hyer I am pore as ever with nuthin' but this yar mine, an' I hain't got ther money ter work this as it oughter be. Ef it wuz in ther han's o' capitalists they'd make it yield ther yaller, you bet!"

"W'y don't ye sell it, daddy?"

"I hev thort o' thet."

"Then we c'd go 'way."

"But I c'dn't git hafe it's wu'th, child."

"I'm 'feared you want too much, daddy."

"It's fer you—all fer you!"

"Then you hed best sell ther mine fu'st chance ye git, fer I reckon I shell die dead ef I hev ter live hyer a great wile now!"

"Wal, ef you say so—"

"You say it is fer me?"

"Shore."

"Thet is ther best thing you kin do fer me. W'at do ye want me ter be so rich fer w'en you are allus tellin' w'at stuck up folks rich people be? You say they don't keer much fer them as is pore, an' sometimes they won't speak ter 'em. W'd ye want me ter be thet way, daddy?"

"You'd never be like thet, Kitty—it hain't in ye! You'd allus be ther same gal ef ye hed fifty million dollars! I want ye ter hev an eddycashun—"

Her eyes were lifted to his.

"Then sell ther mine, daddy. Purty soon I'll be too old ter git an eddycashun, ef I hain't now, then it won't do ary bit o' good to hev so much money."

Zeb knew this was true.

"Wal, I'll try ter do so, ef ye wants me ter, leetle 'un, though it'll be like pullin' eye-teeth arter I hev sot so much on this mine. But ther fu'st thing I must do is—look fer—yer mother's boddie."

He had a fear he would not find it, for already he had searched in vain, but he hoped to find some trace of it. Kate said nothing, and the following morning he began the search. She wished to go with him, but he would not listen to it, knowing he might come upon a ghastly spectacle that would drive her mad with horror.

"Jest you stay right in ther cabin," he said. "Keep ther door fastened, an' thar'll be no danger at all, fer ef red-skias ur white devils come, you kin retreat ter ther secret passage. They'll never fine ye thar."

With a mighty effort, Kate choked down her horror of being left behind at the cabin, and old Zeb called her his brave girl again and again. Then he kissed her and set out on the search.

A day was spent in useless hunting, and night found him quite disheartened. Kate was watching for him when he returned, but she asked him no questions. She read the result in his face.

"Hev ye bin lonely, leetle 'un?" he asked.

"Yes, daddy," she answered, frankly, "I hev bin powerful lonesome."

"Wal, we won't stay hyer much longer."

"How much?"

"Tell day arter ter-morrer, mebbe."

"Then whar'll we go?"

"Ter Silver fu'st."

"But Oie True—"

"He'll be back by thet time."

Neither of them ate much, although Kate had prepared as palatable a meal as possible with the means she had at her command. Their thoughts were such as robbed them of their appetites.

In the dusk of evening they sat down in the cabin door once more, and Kate laid her head on her father's knee. Zeb got out his pipe and smoked in silence. The last gleam of sunshine faded from the ragged peaks and the shadows gathered thickly in Hidden Pocket.

"It duz seem mighty lonesome," Zeb finally confessed. "I uster think this 'bout ther harnsumest spot on ther face o' ther yearth, but it hain't nigh w'at it wuz."

"No, daddy, an' it never will be erg'in."

"I reckon not."

"Ef—ef we only knowed—"

"Yes, ef we knowed w'at hed becom o' her. It seems like I can't go 'way 'thout knowin' thet."

"An' I don't want ye ter. It'll be a turrible thing ter never know whar pore mommy's buried!"

For hours they sat there, each seemingly dreading to enter the cabin. But at last Zeb arose and lifted the girl to her feet. Then they went in together.

With the dawn of another day, the man started out to resume his search.

It was near midday that he came upon a human skeleton. There was not a vestige of clothing about it, but something seemed to tell him he had found the bones of his wife. If so, the shot which Red Hand fired had not killed her instantly, and she had wandered to that spot. There, perhaps, she had lain down to die, or—

A cry of horror broke from his lips, his eyes having fallen on the skull.

It was split as if with the stroke of a tomahawk.

"My God!" he groaned. "Ef them are her bones, thet explains why no clothing is lef' on 'em. She wuz only wounded, an' she managed ter git this fur, then she wuz foun' by ther red devils. They killed her an' stripped her o' her clothes. Ther wolves an' vultures hev done ther rest."

His heart was sick with horror at the thought.

"It won't do ter ever let Kitty know ther truth," he muttered. "She is nigh dead now, an' thet'd kill her quite. I mus' keep it frum her—but how?"

For a long time he considered the question, and at length he arrived at the only conclusion possible.

"Thet is all ther way I kin do it," he said.

Back to the cabin he went, securing a pick and shovel and a blanket. He was unable to obtain these things without the girl's knowledge, but he would answer her questions only indirectly, and he succeeded in getting away as soon as possible.

Back to the place where he found the skeleton he went, and there he set about digging a grave, having first wrapped the bones in the blanket. He lined the grave with moss and green boughs, then he placed the blanket and its terrible burden upon the soft bed. More boughs were placed over the blanket, and the earth shoveled tenderly in.

Zeb was not a praying man, but when the grave was completed, he knelt down beside it and offered up a broken prayer. Something seemed to compel him to do so. Strangely enough, there were no thoughts of vengeance in his heart just then.

Darkness had fallen when he returned to the cabin, but a light gleamed from the little window. Kate was watching and waiting for him. His call brought her to the door.

"I'm so glad you're back, daddy!" she sobbed, as she put her arms about his neck. "It hes bin a turrible day, an' I am nighly dead."

He kissed her tenderly.

"I shell not hev ter leave ye erlone erg'in," he said.

She understood his meaning, and a sobbing moan broke from her lips.

"Why didn't ye bring her back hyer, daddy?"

"Don't ax me, little 'un! I done fer ther best!"

"An' you'll take me ter her grave—"

"Ter-morrer."

"Pore mommy! I want ter putt some flowers on it. We'll gather lots o' ther beautiful wild flowers an' kiver it with 'em. Pr'aps she'll know, even though she is so fur erway as Heaven."

"She's thar, ef ever human bein' went thar!" came believably from the man's lips. "But Red Han', thet cussid murderin'—"

Kate tried to press her hand over his mouth, but he broke from her and excitedly paced the floor, his hard hands clinched and his eyes blazing. Neither of them seemed to notice the door was standing wide open.

At length Zeb halted, crying fiercely:

"May ther cuss o' God pursue thet dastard! Shore as thar is a Heaven erbove us, I'll foller him ter his death! Yes, I'll sell ther mine, fer I'll never do another stroke o' work tell I see Red Han' layin' dead at my feet! I sw'ar it!"

In the open door stepped Hurricane Hal.

"And so you are another who seeks fer vengeance on that monster?" said the cowboy. "He can have done you no greater wrong than he has me, and as he wronged me first, I have the first claim on his life."

CHAPTER XIX.

VANISHED.

THAT night Hurricane Hal and Maverick Mat stopped beneath old Zeb's roof. The cowboy told his story and heard Zeb's in return. They decided, as both were in the same boat, they had better sail together. All that Zeb asked was to

see the Marauder meet a merited fate, while Hal demanded the satisfaction of ending the career of the wretch. They found they could work together to mutual advantage.

Both Hal and Mat were struck by the appearance of Kate, but the girl kept well in the background. Still her blue eyes more than once sunk before the dark orbs of the young avenger. Mat saw this, and he fancied there was a strong light of admiration in his companion's eyes.

"Bet two to one Hal is hard hit!" he mentally exclaimed.

The following morning Zeb and Kate started out to visit the grave where he had interred the skeleton, the cowboys having agreed to remain at the cabin till they returned. It was decided there was little danger from Indians, for Geronimo and his band had disappeared as suddenly as they came.

Zeb and Kate came back near midday, and with them was Old True Blue.

It was decided not to start for Silver till the following morning.

How it came about only Hal or Kate could have told, but in some way the two fell into conversation with each other. Just what they found to talk about was left for the others to surmise, but Mat chuckled with satisfaction.

"I am glad of it!" he declared, to himself. "If Hal would fall in love with her it would be a good thing for him. He must have something to take his mind from what it has been dwelling on so much of late or he will go mad. Constant thoughts of vengeance are not pleasant companions by any means, and for a time they have haunted him like specters."

An early start for Silver was made, and the little party were many miles on their journey at sunrise.

With nightfall they rode into the town and stopped at the little adobe hotel.

Excitement in Silver City was still at a high pitch, although it had abated somewhat within the last two days. Rumors of Indian depredations were still rife, but people had begun to understand that at least one-half of them were without foundation.

In the evening Hal and Mat visited the saloons of the camp, hoping to see some trace of Sleek Saul; but if the gambler had returned to Silver City, his disguise was of such a character that he was not recognized.

"He is not here," said Mat.

"It seems impossible that he can be," confessed Hal. "In truth, I scarcely expected to find him."

"Nor I."

"I fancy he has returned to his old haunt in the Mimbres."

"I have thought so."

"Still there is one thing I cannot understand."

"What is that?"

"Why he should be hurrying into Arizona with but one companion."

"I have thought of that," declared Mat. "But you know his gang was attacked by Apaches."

"Yes."

"Perhaps he only escaped with that one ruffian."

"But those six men were not all of his band, by any means."

"Surely not; he is said to have half a hundred followers at times."

"I believe the story is exaggerated."

"Possible! still it is certain he has more than six men."

"I suppose the only thing we can do is hunt his retreat in the Mimbres."

They went back to the hotel and discussed the matter with Zeb and Old True, and in the end the four decided to strike for the Mimbres after allowing their horses a day to recuperate.

So another day was passed in Silver.

During the day Hal and Kate spent nearly two hours in each other's company, and Mat noted there was a brighter look on his comrade's face—he appeared more like his natural self.

"Dead struck!" laughed the blonde cowboy.

"Hit right where he lives! The girl has come nearer smiling to-day than at any time since I first set eyes on her. If her mother were alive now, Kate would be head and heels in love with my pard. By Jove! she couldn't fall in love with a better man!"

It happened that the proprietor of the hotel was a warm friend to Zeb Horn, and so the old man left his daughter in Rush Dobson's care.

Although Kate dreaded to have her father leave her, she made no protest, feeling it was his duty to do so.

In the morning they started; at night they camped within the outer limits of the mysterious Mimbres. They were satisfying their hunger from the provisions they had brought, when, to their surprise, two persons appeared close at hand. In an instant both were covered by the ready weapons of the little party, Old True calling, sternly:

"Hold up thar, yeon! Who in thutteration be ye anyhow?"

"Friends," was the reply; and Zeb exclaimed:

"It's Soft Foot an' his gal!"

It was indeed the friendly Ute and the maiden, Silver Tongue. The Indian was greeted warmly, but he declined to sit down.

"Soft Foot has come to warn his friends," he declared.

"Ter warn us?" cried Zeb.

"Yes."

"Let her slide, Soft Foot; what am it?"

"Red Hand knows you are within these mountains."

"Sho!"

"It is true; he has a spy on you."

"A spy?"

"Yes; you were dogged from Silver."

"Impossible!"

"Did you ever know Soft Foot to make a mistake?"

"Derned ef I ever did!"

"He has made none this time. If you remain here, the Red Hand will fall on you before morning, and none will escape."

"Gosh all hemlock!" cried Old Ballou. "It kinder behooves us ter git up an' git."

"Soft Foot will conduct his white brothers to another camping-place."

"Soft Foot, yeon are a trump!"

There was little delay in preparing to move, and soon they were on their way. The Ute led them through the deeper shadows of a barren pass, Silver Tongue keeping close at his side.

"Whar be your hosses?" asked Zeb.

"They are some miles away," replied the Indian. "We saw the four whites approaching, for we were far up the side of a lofty mountain from which we can view the town of the pale-faces. We also saw the spy that followed like a wolf on the trail."

"Waal," drawled Old True Blue, "yeon are ther gosh blamdest Injun I ever saw, an' that's facts! Yeon are alwus raound somewhar, an' them eyes of yourn seem ter take in ev'rything."

"Soft Foot has many enemies; he is hated by the bad white men, and he has to have the eyes of an eagle."

Zeb started to tell the Indian about the finding of his child, but the red brave interrupted him with a gesture.

"Soft Foot knows."

Zeb was astonished.

"Waal, thet beats me! How did ye find thet out?"

"Soft Foot was away to the western mountains. His eyes are keen."

"Waal, I sh'ud say so!"

For about two miles the Ute led them on, then they halted in a narrow and shadowy gorge.

"Build no fires," was Soft Foot's command.

"Keep quiet. If you have come to match your cunning against the strength of the Red Hand, you must be shrewd indeed."

They knew he spoke the truth.

For a while the Indian remained with them, and throughout the time Silver Tongue uttered no word. At length Soft Foot said he must depart, but promised to see them on the morrow.

When the Indian man and maiden were gone Mat ventured to ask about them, but the cowboy had no more than opened his mouth when Old True Blue broke into a rollicking laugh.

"Great gosh!" he cried. "I knowed one of yeon two fellers'd be tuck with that gal! She's er stunner, an' she didn't show up on 'caout of ther shadders. She's purty nigh as white as a white gal, an' I call'ate she has white blood in her veins. Anyhaow Soft Fut won't have much ter say 'baout that p'int."

Zeb answered Mat's questions about the Ute and the girl, telling all he knew of Soft Foot, which was very little, indeed. The Indian was something of a mystery, seeming to be a hermit—an outcast from his own people, or one who had voluntarily withdrawn.

The four men were weary, but Zeb was so nervous he could not sleep. For that reason, he offered to stand guard the first portion of the night. The offer was accepted, and the others wrapped themselves in their blankets. They were soon sleeping soundly, while Zeb paced back and forth, smoking his black pipe.

Old True Blue was to be the next to stand guard, but midnight passed and he was not called.

At length the Trusty awoke, started up and looked around. The moonlight was falling on the opposite wall of the gorge, but the sleepers were still within the shadows. The veteran looked for Zeb, but saw nothing of him.

"Naow I wonder whar he kin be?" muttered Old True, throwing the blanket aside and rising to his feet. "It is past midnight, but he hain't called me ter take his place. I swan ter man! thet looks 'zif suthin' 's wrong—it duz, by gosh!"

Without arousing the sleeping cowboys, he began to look around for Zeb, but the man had disappeared! For ten or fifteen minutes he searched and called softly without arousing the cowboys, but by the end of that time he was thoroughly alarmed, and he spoke to Hal and Mat.

"Wake up heur!" he called. "Ther deuce is ter pay, I call'ate!"

Both the cattlemen leaped up, weapons in hand.

"What is the row?" demanded Mat.

"Raow ernough," answered True. "Zeb has completely vanished 'zif he wur er spook."

He then explained that their comrade could not be found, although his horse and accouter-

ments were near by. Then the three began to search and call for the missing man, feeling that he must be near at hand.

"It cannot be anything has happened to him," said Mat. "He is not far away."

But their search failed to reveal him. Zeb Horn had vanished in a remarkable manner.

"It is the most singular thing I ever heard of!" asserted the blonde cowboy.

Old Truman shook his head, soberly.

"Ef he don't show up by mornin'," he said, "I'll sw'ar he wur aout of his head an' waddled off of his own 'cord."

Morning came, but it brought no sign of the missing man.

CHAPTER XX.

"I AM RED HAND!"

TIME hung heavily on Kate Horn's hands at the hotel. She knew no one in Silver, and life in a town of any sort was strange to her. It would have given her some diversion to watch the people—it did; but not so much as if a great sorrow was not hanging over her. She longed for a young lady friend into whose ear she could pour the whole tale, and from whom she would receive sympathy.

Every morning and noon Silver's pleasant-faced little post-mistress passed the hotel, and Kate longed to speak to her, she looked so kind and lovable.

"I wonder if she knows what it is to be sad?" the poor girl murmured to herself. "Her face always looks so bright and happy! I wonder if a great sorrow will ever enter her life and change her smiles to tears?"

It was the long dreary nights that the girl dreaded most. She did not sleep well, and when she did sleep she was haunted by horrible dreams. Many a time she dreamed of her mother as she fell before the bullet of the murderous Red Hand, and she would awake, shrieking with terror.

Sometimes she thought of the dark-faced cowboy who had been so kind to her. She wondered if she would ever see him again.

Thus two days and two nights passed away.

At length Kate could remain idle in the hotel no longer.

"I must do something or go wild—I jest must!" she cried.

She decided to ride, thinking a dash in the open air would do her good, but when she spoke of it to the landlord, he was strongly opposed to anything of the kind.

"Your father put you in my care, Miss Horn," he said, "and I am responsible for your safety."

"But I jest must do suthin'!" she exclaimed, desperately. "I can't keep still—I can't eat—I can't sleep!"

The man knew this was true, for he had been watching the girl, and he saw she was pale, restless and wretched.

"There is still danger of the hostiles," he declared. "No one knows just where old Geronimo is or what move he will make next."

"I am not goin' whar I shall be in any danger from them."

"There is danger anywhere outside the limits of the town. I will provide you with an escort."

To this she objected, but the landlord would not allow her to ride in any other manner, and she finally consented on his assurance that it should be a Mexican lad of fourteen.

"You must keep close to the town anyway," said the landlord. "There is no telling what may lay on the outskirts."

He also cautioned the Mexican boy, and it was not without anxiety that he watched them ride from the hotel.

Kate was a graceful rider, and there was nothing she enjoyed more than a dash on a spirited animal.

"How I w'd like to ride on to them mountains an' visit pore ole mommy's grave!" she thought, as they reached the northern limit of the town, and she was able to look away to the western range of the Mimbres, the Diablo Mountains. "I dunno but I'll be reddy ter go back thar ter live by an' by, so I kin be clost ter whar she is burried."

The Mexican boy did not allow her to go far from the town.

"The Indians are very thick, senorita," he declared. "Juan does not care to lose his hair."

They turned back and rode through the town again, passing out upon the Mimbres Trail to the south.

Kate drew the Mexican lad into conversation, and neither of them noticed till they were some distance from Silver. Then Juan drew rein abruptly, exclaiming:

"Mary Mother defend us! Look, senorita, see how far we have come! We had better hasten back!"

Kate felt no fear, but she had given her promise, so she did not object to turning back. Both of them noticed a horseman who was galloping swiftly toward them from the town.

"Do ye know him?" asked Kate.

"No, senorita."

"He looks like er scout ur cowboy."

"Si, senorita."

"And he seems ter be in er powerful hurry."

They grew more and more interested in the

horseman as he approached, and he seemed to be scanning them closely. He was mounted on a horse that had evidently been ridden hard, for it was covered with foam. As he came up, he lifted his broad sombrero with a sweeping motion, reining in his horse.

"Are you Miss Horn?" he asked, looking at Kate.

"That is my name," she answered.

"Then lan'lord tole me I'd find ye out this yar way," declared the man. "I am jest in frum ther mountains."

Kate uttered an exclamation.

"Then daddy—ye know suthin' o' him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good news or bad? Tell me quick ur I shell go wild! W'at is it?"

"Both."

"How kin thet be?"

"Ther story is too long ter tell hyer in this yar boilin' sun," the man declared. "D'yer see them thar rocks thar' aside ther trail?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Wal, that's er shadder thar. Let's go on ter thet place, an' I'll tell ye all there is ter know."

The man seemed about overcome with the heat, and so Kate did not wonder that he wished to seek the shelter of the rocks. As they rode toward the point designated, she asked:

"W'at's ther good news? Tell me thet fu'st, then mebbe I kin stan' ther bad better."

"Wal, yer father has foun' ther Red Han'."

Kate caught her breath. Something seemed to chain her tongue till the shadows at the base of the ragged rocks were reached. Then she spoke again:

"W'at is ther bad news?"

The man replied:

"Red Han' hes foun' yer father!"

This answer puzzled the girl, and a laugh broke from the fellow's lips—a laugh of triumph. Kate did not like it; it gave her a cold chill.

"Mebbe ye wonder how I know this," spoke the stranger, fixing his eyes upon her in a way that filled her with alarm. "Wal, I will tell ye. See!" and with one hand he tore from his face a false beard which he wore as a disguise. "I am Red Hand!"

CHAPTER XXI.

OLD TRUE BLUE'S DISCOVERY.

Two days were spent by the cowboys and Old True Blue in fruitless searching for the missing man, and at the end of that time Zeb Horn's disappearance remained as great a mystery as ever. The trio were somewhat disheartened at the end of the second day as they settled down to discuss the situation.

"Darned ef these maountings don't seem deserted by 'most ev'ry livin' critter!" came disgustedly from the Trusty's lips. "They be as lonesome as Swamp Holler, whar I used ter go ter skule 'way daown in Maine, an' folks said that wur ther last spot made on ther yearth."

"The mountains are certainly deserted and dismal enough," acknowledged Mat. "It is a wild land fit for the hiding-place of the monster, Red Hand."

"An' it's 'tarnal plain that hidin'-place hain't very easy ter find."

"Still we have not been searching for it since we came here. Zeb's disappearance has occupied our attention, and we have hunted for him."

"Mebbe we'd find him quicker ef we'd hunt fer Red Han's hoel."

"Then you think—"

"I don't know jest whut ter think, an' that's facts. I don't *durst* ter think! It's ther darnedest sing'ler thing I ever heerd on—it is, by gosh!"

Neither of the cowboys denied the old man's emphatic assertion, for both felt it was singular indeed. The most reasonable conclusion seemed to be that Zeb had become deranged by his affliction and had wandered away of his own accord to meet some cruel fate among the lonely mountains; but Old True was not ready to accept such a view.

"Zeb Horn had er hard head on his shoulders," the veteran asserted. "He wur not er man ter be easy broke up an' go off ther hooks. Not that he didn't think a pile of Betsey, but he hed that gal ter live fer, an' that's ernough fer any man."

"You are right," said Hal, whose thoughts happened to be of Kate at that moment.

Old True turned his eyes toward a bluff that overhung their heads and winked knowingly at the bare rocks, just the ghost of a grin flitting across his weather-beaten countenance.

"It is pretty certain something of a serious nature happened to Zeb Horn," put in Mat. "Yet we were unable to find any signs of a struggle in the vicinity of the camp."

"Ef Zeb had ary bit of time fer ter struggle, he'd roused us up," asserted the Trusty. "Whut-ever happened ter him, he wur knocked out ther fu'st raound. But thar is another thing that puzzled me most 'tarnally."

"What is that?"

"Whar is ther Ute, Soft Fut?"

"I have scarcely given him a thought since Zeb disappeared."

"But I have. He said as haow he wur comin' raound ther next day arter ther night he saw us

larst, but he hain't showed his noedle. Soft Fut hain't ther kind ter fail ter keep his word."

"What do you make of it?"

"Great gosh all hemlock! I dunno whut ter make of it! I'm stuck—an' bad stuck at that."

"You do not imagine he had any hand in Zeb's disappearance?"

"Holy smoke, no! Soft Fut is w'ite clean through, ef his skin is off color jest er leetle. He kin be 'pended on."

"Then something must have happened to him."

"Mebbe so."

"It looks that way."

"It looks 'tarnal mysterfyin' ter me."

The more they talked about the matter the greater became their perplexity. One thing was certain: If they discovered no game in the mountains, they would have to return to Silver for provisions.

"Grub's gittin' mighty low," announced Old Truman.

"It is singular we have not even seen any small game," commented Hal.

"I tell ye thar's suthin' 'tarnal quare 'baout these maountings. They say thar is gold heur, but it hain't mined ter any great extent, yeou bet! I have heerd stories 'baout spooks an' sich bein' seen in these parts."

"But we have seen nothing of anything—"

"Unless that is a spook there!" exclaimed Mat, suddenly starting up and jerking out a revolver, his eyes fastened on a figure that was advancing out of the darkness.

"Halt!" cried Old True, the double click of his revolver, emphasizing the command. "Jest yeou chain up thar an' give ther caountersign. Who be ye?"

"It is I, Silver Tongue, the friend of the whites," replied a musical voice.

"By chaowder!" exclaimed the Trusty, lowering the hammer of his weapon. "It's Soft Fut's gall! Naow we'll know whut's becum of ther Injun him own self."

The dusky maiden came fearlessly forward, and Old Ballon met her, declaring:

"We're mighty tickled ter see ye, leetle gal. But, whar is Soft Fut?"

"He has gone to the town of the pale-faces."

"Ter Silver?"

"Yes."

The Trusty and the cowboy were surprised.

"Whut tuck him thar?" asked True.

"He followed one of the crooked paie-faces."

The veteran started.

"One of Red Hand's band?"

"Yes."

"Why did he follow him?"

"He thought he knew him."

"So? Who wur it?"

"Soft Foot thought it was the Red Hand himself!"

The word brought Hurricane Hal to his feet with a single spring.

"Red Hand?" he cried. "Then that dastard has given us the slip again!"

"Keep cool, pard!" advised Old True.

"Mebbe yeou're right; mebbe not. Mebbe it wur not ther Red Han' at all. Soft Fut wur not sure."

"If it was the Marauder, he may return," said Mat.

"Not if he went for the purpose of giving me the slip!"

"The pale-face does not know the Red Hand," ventured Silver Tongue.

"Know him!" came gratefully from Hal's lips. "I know the wretch too well!"

"But he would not flee before a few whites when he has a band of many."

"Perhaps not; but he knows and fears me. I have sworn to have his life, and he dares not meet me man to man."

"He did not go to the town of the whites to escape any danger that threatened," firmly asserted the Indian maiden. "There was some other reason for his act."

"What reason could there be?"

Silver Tongue shook her head.

"I know not; but Soft Foot will know before he returns."

"Is Soft Foot Red Hand's enemy?"

"He loves him not."

"There is a reason?"

"Yes. Once the Red Hand tried to make Silver Tongue a captive and kill Soft Foot. He did not succeed; Soft Foot saved Silver Tongue and shot Red Hand. But the crooked pale-face was not badly wounded, and he soon recovered. He has said he would kill Soft Foot."

"Waal, he has tackled er 'tarnal big job," nodded Old True. "Soft Fut is a hard boy ter daown."

Silver Tongue looked around curiously, and, failing to see but three of them, asked for Zeb. Old True told her of the man's singular and unaccountable disappearance, to which the Indian maiden listened with interest.

"When Soft Foot returns," she said, decisively, "he will find what has become of Golden Hair's hope."

"We hope so, by 'tarnal; an' so ther sooner he comes back ther better we shall be pleased. Ef he don't come soon, we shall run aout of per-visions, fer thar don't seem ter be much of any game raound these parts."

"There is game enough, if the white men know where to find it."

"Then it is sart'in we don't know whar ter find it."

"If Soft Foot does not return on the coming of another sun, Silver Tongue will show the pale-faces where to find enough game."

"In which case we shall be mightily in yeour debt."

After a few minutes more of talk that would be of little interest to the reader if given, Silver Tongue took her departure. When she was gone, Maverick Mat exclaimed:

"I believe you are right, True!"

"'Baout whut, lad?"

"About Silver Tongue having white blood in her veins."

"Oh, I am right on that, shore's ye'r' born!"

"She seems more like a white girl than an Indian."

"Mebbe thar's more w'ite than Injun 'baout her. But it hain't at all strange that she should seem 'that way, fer Soft Fut would have made a 'tarnal good pale-face."

The night passed uneventfully, and with dawn the three were astir. Hitherto they had prosecuted the search collectively, but this morning Old True proposed another plan—that each should make a lone hunt of it, all returning to that spot at night.

"Ef we are cautious," said the old fellow, "that'll be ther best way of doin', fer we'll hev three chanches of success ter one t'other way."

The matter was thoroughly talked over, and finally the plan was adopted, each man choosing his course before they started.

It was near noon when Old True found himself far up the side of a rugged mountain, having concealed his horse in a thicket at the bottom.

Just why he had taken a fancy to climb that particular mountain the old man could not have told, but he had arrived at a point where the granite walls seemed to block further advance, and he had taken a fancy to see the country beyond.

The mid-day sun was pouring its fierce heat down on the scorched-appearing mountains. It was a wild scene upon which the veteran's eyes rested. Beetling cliffs were on every hand; yawning chasms, dark and dismal, lay below. Into these gloomy depths monster boulders had fallen and lay piled in chaotic heaps. Upon the mountain sides hung huge ragged blocks of stone that seemed awaiting the pressure of a finger to send them crashing and thundering downward, sweeping everything before them.

Mountains were all around—above, below, on either hand. Some were bald and barren, some were partially covered by stunted trees that seemed clinging upon the slopes or growing more thickly on the cliffs.

From his position old True Blue could look over the edge of a narrow cliff down into the black and terrible depths a thousand feet below. He did look, and, steady-nerved though he was, his brain grew dizzy and a horrible sickness came upon him, as for one mad instant he was assailed by that fearful impulse that seizes nearly every one on the brink of some dizzy height—the insane longing to leap into space!

Drawing back with an exertion of his will that overcame the mad desire, he made his way along the cliff, noting with interest that his feet were treading a beaten path over the rocks. Just when he had struck that path he could not say, for his interest had probably been absorbed in something else at that moment, but he knew it could have been but a few minutes before, at most.

"I swan ter man!" he muttered; "I more'n hafe believe this path wur made by human critters! 'Tain't likely this leads ter watter any-whar, so why sh'ud annimills travel it so much that they'd make it plain ter a feller's eyes? Mebbe I have struck a trail."

The thought made him redouble his caution, for he knew not what danger the mountain-path might lead him into. With a weapon ready for use—the deadly Winchester in his hand—he pushed onward and upward.

The trail was so difficult that, if it were made by animals, it seemed available only for the mountain goat or the formidable grizzly. At places Old True seemed doubtful concerning further advance, but most of the obstacles were easier to surmount than their appearance promised.

The trail wound around the mountain, and the old man felt sure he would obtain a look at the country beyond, that being what he desired. He was in the wildest section of the Mimbres, and he had come to a portion that seemed walled in by the rugged walls. If the path he was traveling had been made by human feet, what discovery lay before him?

The question was soon answered. The trail reached its loftiest point and wound around a point of boulders, passing along another cliff that overhung the awful depths below. The veteran did not pause to look downward, for he was too eager to see what lay beyond.

Old True crept cautiously forward, and when he had passed the rocky point, he could look down into a large basin or pocket that seemed surrounded on every hand by unbroken bluffs, hundreds of feet in height. At one side of the

basin a stream of water issued from the wall at least fifty feet from the level below, forming a handsome cataract as it fell. This stream wound across the pocket and disappeared into a dark opening under the eastern wall.

But, what filled the man on the mountain-side with the greatest amazement was the fact that he seemed looking down on a small town or camp built on either side of the little stream. There were eight buildings of wood, stone and sun-dried bricks. Within the shadows of those buildings he discerned men who were stretched on the ground in various positions of indolence, or were lazily moving about. Being so far away, they looked like dwarfs, but the veteran knew they were full-grown human beings, and he doubted not they were armed to the teeth.

Outside the cluster of buildings, horses and horned cattle were feeding on the grass, which grew abundantly in the basin.

"Great jewhizzilin' gosh all hemlock!" gasped Old True Blue, smiting his thigh with his open hand. "I have stubbed right onter a reg'lar aoutlaw taown, by gosh!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A FEARFUL ENCOUNTER.

LITTLE wonder Old True Blue was amazed; it was a spectacle to fill almost any one with astonishment. There in the very heart of the wild and desolate Mimbres, walled in by the bleak and repellent mountains, within a basin that at first glance seemed to have no outlet, lay a genuine outlaw town.

And what was more astonishing than anything else was its proximity to Silver City and the smaller camps of the Mimbres Valley.

It seemed impossible that such a place could exist and not be known to the outside world.

"Darned if it hain't er ternal wonder!" muttered the discoverer, drawing back behind some rocks, but still keeping his eyes fastened on the town as if fascinated by the sight. "Haow this place c'd be heur an' never be faound by all ther prospectors that come up inter these maountings is whut gits me—an' it gits me *bad*!"

It was truly a singular thing, but the veteran remembered many of the prospectors had disappeared never to be seen any more. That seemed to explain something to his mind.

"I'll bet a boss they faound this taown an' wur faound by some of the aoutlaws. Ef that wur the way of it, 'course they wur wiped aout. That 'splains why people never knowed of this place. Ther wurn't nobody ter tell of it. Them singler disappearances have bin w'at giv these maountings ther air of mystery an' made folks so skeered of em. But yer Uncle True has tumbled ter er thing er two, an' ef they wipe him aout they'll have ter hustle, by gosh!"

Further inspection of the basin showed a dark opening in the wall near the foot of the waterfall. True had been wondering how the outlaws got their cattle and other things into the basin, for it was certain the creatures had not followed the trail over the mountain.

"That 'splains suthin' else!" he apostrophized. "Darned if I don't believe thar is er passage under ther maounting—a kinder Hoosaic Tunnel arrangement! Ther hosses an' horned critters wur druv through that place. That's ther way of it, sure as ginger's ginger!"

In truth, this seemed the only way the animals could have entered the basin.

The old explorer began investigating the path which led downward from the point he had reached. At certain places it disappeared from view, but his keen eyes followed the greater part of its course till the bottom of the pocket was nearly reached. There it had twisted around until it reached the verge of a perpendicular bluff that rose smooth and apparently unscalable from the level below.

"That seems ter be a kinder jumpin'-off place," muttered the old fellow, wonderingly. "Ther path can't be of much use ter any one that wants ter git inter ther basin unless thar is some kind of er way of passin' that place, an' that's facts. Wonder jest haow they work it?"

It did not take him long to study it out.

"Thar must be some kind of er rope-ladder 'rangement that is let daown from ther top of ther bluff. That's ther way of it. This path's only used fer a suttin puppose. Naow I have solved that part of ther 'rangement, I'll know haow ter git daown inter ther pocket. Mister Red Han', yeou may 'spect er visit from yeours trewly, Truman Ballou, b'fore long. I'm goin' daown thar this comin' night ef I live an' have my bein'."

The venturesome old fellow had made a firm resolve to visit and inspect the outlaw town at any hazard. He had not come to the Mimbres for nothing.

"Ef Zeb Horn hain't dead, he's daown thar!" averred True. "I can't jest understan' it, but I cal'late he must have fell inter ther aoutlaws han's in some way ur ruther. Bein' as Red Han' hes bin erway so long, it's possible he is still erlive; but I don't b'lieve he'd las' long arter ther boss devil of 'em all arriv'. Ef he's livin' an' anythin' 's done fer him, it mus' be did ter-night."

Over and over in his head the veteran revolved half a dozen plans, but was unable to

settle on any of them. He finally decided to make the venture without any definite plan formed and trust to fortune. He could tell better how to act when the emergency arose that required a certain action of some sort. It was certain he could not tell beforehand just what would occur, therefore he could not plan to meet all emergencies.

First, he would return to the place where he was to meet the cowboys. But he hesitated when he considered how much time that would occupy. It was not probable the young cattlemen would appear at the appointed place until nightfall, and then they would be many miles from the outlaws' camp. True was not certain he could retrace his course accurately through the shadows of the dark ravines, and should he be able to do so, it would be midnight, at the very least, before they could reach the point he now occupied. After that the descent into the basin and the escape therefrom lay before them, and that would certainly occupy much of the remainder of the night. How much time would they have for work in the outlaw town?

"Darn it all!" softly growled the man on the mountain, a troubled look on his thin face. "I'm in a turrible stew, an' that's facts. I dunno jest whut ter dew. Ef I don't git back ter meet Hal an' Mat at ther 'p'inted place, they'll think I'm kerflummixed, an' ef I dew go back, I'll lose my show heur. I say it's er turrible mess! I mus' git daown thar ter-night, thar hain't no discountin' that!"

The more he considered the situation the greater became his perplexity, till at last he was thoroughly disgusted.

"Can't see but one thing ter dew," he murmured, after a long time. "I've got ter let ther boys go, an' slide daown heur. Ef I don't git aout, thar'll be another mysterious disappearance."

"But thar's my boss, I mus' see ter him. He's hitched so he c'u'dn't git only some browsin', though he might break erway ef I didn't return a tail, an' I cal'late he w'u'd. Anyhaow I guess I'll go daown an' look arter him. It hain't best ter stay heur, fer thar hain't no good chainece ter hide raound this place, an' ef some of ther aoutlaws sh'u'd come frum over ther maounting, I'd be ketched in er 'tarnal bad scrape, by golding!"

Taking a final look at the outlaw camp, he turned back along the trail and was soon on the narrow, jutting cliff that wound round the point of rocks. He could not see the trail beyond the point, and a sudden thought filled him with a strange sensation akin to fear.

What if he should meet one of the outlaws face to face on the shelf?

"It'd be his life ur mine!" thought Old Truman.

In another moment he reached the point of rocks, and then a cry came from his lips.

At the same instant that he was about to turn the point a man stepped into view from the opposite side!

His fear had been realized! He was face to face with one of the outlaws!

The two men were not six feet apart, and they stood on a narrow ledge not more than three feet wide!

For a moment both halted in consternation and glared at each other. The same impulse seemed to guide the two men, for their hands fell on the hafts of ready knives and they leaped forward at the same instant.

The knives flashed in the scorching sunlight—the deadly foes met on the narrow ledge!

Old Ballou knew it was to be a battle for life, and so concentrated all his energy into the first dash, hoping to overcome his adversary before the outlaw regained his presence of mind.

But it happened that the bandit was swift of thought, and he also strained every nerve as he made that desperate dash.

They met, and the left hand of each clutched the right wrist of the other, thus holding back the glittering blades that seemed thirsting for human blood. As they stood thus on that narrow ledge, glaring into each other's eyes, it was a tableau for the brush of an artist. Their faces were transformed by feelings of fear and deadly determination, their teeth showed behind their withdrawn lips, their muscles were drawn to the greatest tension. On the countenance of each man rested a look that reminded one of an animal at bay. All the finer and more human instincts had been blotted out; only the instinct of self-preservation at the cost of another's life remained.

Above their heads a vulture wheeled, casting a glance at the two figures on the ledge. The foul bird seemed to know there would soon be a feast spread for him on the ragged rocks away down in the canyon's blackness, more than a thousand feet below. From his beak came a hoarse croak of delight that sounded like the laugh of a fiend.

Neither of the two men heard the vulture's croak—it is doubtful if they would have noticed a peal of thunder. Their one thought was of their own peril.

Something like a mingled laugh and snarl—a horrible sound—came from behind the yellow teeth of the outlaw; a red light flared unsteadily in his wild eyes, like a faint and fitful flash of lightning along the border of a thunder-cloud.

"Dern ye!" he gritted, the words seeming ground through those clinched teeth.

"Same ter yeou!" was the Trusty's instant retort. "Double darn ye!"

"You must die!"

"I wur thinkin' yeou wur in ther same fix."

"It's your life ur mine!"

"Mebbe both!"

There was a moment of silence, then the outlaw asked:

"Who be ye?"

"I'm Ole Chain-lightnin' on trucks," was the reply.

"Wal, you'll wish ye hed wings 'stead of trucks afore long. How kem ye hyer?"

"By ther reg'ler road."

"W'at ye hyer fer?"

"Oh, jest snoopin' raound."

"Wal, I 'low this is yer las' snoop."

"Mebbe so; mebbe not. I reckon not. Ef yeou know any pra's yeou'd best be sayin' 'em over."

"W'at are ye goin' ter do?"

"Send ye daown ther terboggan slide."

Again they were silent, glaring into each other's eyes. Neither man seemed in a hurry to bring on the encounter, for both knew the result would be deadly. How could the battle have but one result? There was not sufficient room on the ledge for a knife-duel, and should one of them be successful in wounding the other fatally the one thus wounded might leap over the brink, clinging fast to his destroyer, and thus both would go whirling down to death.

The minutes dragged slowly by and still the two men remained in that rigid attitude, every nerve drawn taut, waiting for the instant when the other should relax his vigilance in the slightest degree.

The shadow of the vulture fell upon them and again the bird of ill-omen uttered its harsh croak.

It seemed as if that broke the spell. With a snarl, the outlaw made a desperate attempt to wrest his knife-hand from the clutch of his adversary, but Old True held fast, knowing one direct stroke of the bright blade would mean a gush of blood—dizziness—a whirl through empty space—death!

Both men exerted their strength to the utmost, but each pressed hard against the rocky wall furthest from the brink of the cliff. Neither made an attempt to hurl the other over the verge, for both knew the danger of being dragged down by the one thus doomed.

Despite his age, Old True Blue was no mean adversary, as the outlaw soon discovered. He had muscles of steel, and he was not the man to lose his nerve though face to face with the most appalling danger.

Great drops of sweat stood out on the faces of the two men as they twisted and squirmed in each other's clutch. With each passing moment they seemed to become more desperate and more determined.

"Dern ye!" came pantingly from the outlaw's lips. "You hev got ter go down!"

"Not ter-day!" was the reply. "It is yeou, pard, as is booked fer the Sweet By an' By."

"Ef I c'u'd only—"

"But ye can't, ye know!"

Once they reeled away from the wall and hung tottering on the brink of the chasm, horror written on their faces. Still they clung fast to each other, neither attempting to break away or hurl the other over, for both understood how fatal such a move might be.

At length they regained their balance and once more swayed back against the solid wall. It was not strange that gasps of relief should come from their lips and their bronzed faces should be ashen in color.

For some minutes they leaned against the wall glaring into each other's eyes and regaining their spent strength. Neither entertained a thought of giving up, for both loved life.

"That wur er close call, pard," observed Old True.

A snarl came from the outlaw's lips.

"Too darned close!" he replied.

"I cal'late yeou'll go over next time."

"It'll be you!"

"Neow don't fool yerself by thinkin' that. I hain't takin' sech er jump ter-day."

"Not of yer own 'cord, but I'm goin' ter help ye ter."

"Yer pluck is good, pard, but yeou hain't built right. As ther boys uster say at skule: 'Yeou can't spell able.'"

"We shell see."

Once more the contest was resumed—the terrible struggle for life. How long it might have continued or what the result would have been can only be surmised, but, suddenly, something occurred that decided the fight.

Above the heads of the two men a stone as large as a man's head became loosened and started on its plunge to the bottom of the dark ravine.

Old True's enemy happened to be directly in the path of the falling stone!

He was doomed!

Just as the rock struck the outlaw Old True made a wild endeavor to break from the man's grasp.

He was partially successful.

With a wild yell of horror and despair, the doomed wretch went whirling downward to be dashed in pieces on the jagged rocks below.

Old True Blue was left tottering on the brink of the terrible fall, wildly swinging his arms in the endeavor to regain his balance.

Fruitless effort!

In another instant a great groan broke from his lips and he fell!

CHAPTER XXIII.

RED HAND TRIUMPHANT.

WHAT was the secret of Zeb Horn's disappearance?

The old man was restless, and when the others were sleeping soundly he paced back and forth, seeming unable to remain quiet a moment, for all of the tiresome journey of the day.

He was thinking of Betsey, his poor murdered wife.

The moments passed slowly.

Zeb paused and listened to the breathing of the sleepers. The horses pawed restlessly near at hand. These sounds made him nervous, for he longed to be alone.

Wheeling, the guard strode away in the darkness. When he had passed some distance from his companions, he paused and sat down on a suitable boulder.

"Here I am alone," he muttered. "If I wish ter groan I kin do so 'thout roustin' t'others."

He bowed his head and sat thinking, thinking. He was not sure he had buried Betsey's bones—he could never be sure of that. Of course she was dead, but he would never know that she had a decent burial. He had not told little Kate of his doubts, for he did not wish her to share his feeling of uncertainty.

As he sat thus he saw nothing of two figures that were creeping toward his back. Nothing warned him of danger.

With the noiseless tread of a cat one of the dark figures came on, something clutched in its hands. Not a sound did it make till a point was reached directly behind the unsuspecting man. Then the hands were raised, and the heavy instrument they clutched fell with a thud upon Zeb Horn's head.

Without a groan the old man sunk forward in a senseless condition.

With a soft chuckle of satisfaction, the man who had dealt the blow bent over the fallen father, and the other glided swiftly to his side. In a short time Zeb was securely bound, then they lifted him and bore him away.

When Zeb became conscious again he found he was bound upon the back of a moving horse. The arms of a strong man held him in an upright position, and another man rode a second horse at his side. They were deep within the shadows of the mountains.

The men were talking, and Zeb listened.

"Ther cap'n tole us ter see ef we c'u'dn't ketch ther ole coon, but I never dreamed he'd walk right inter our han's in thet way."

"Ner I."

"It wuz er great streak of luck."

"Now you're shoutin'!"

"Wonder w'at ther boss wants of this ole galoot?"

"You know he is stuck on Horn's gal."

"Yep."

"Wal, I 'low thet 'splains it."

"How?"

"Probably reckons on gittin' ther gal some way by ketchin' ther ole man."

"I don't think thet's it."

"Then you hev an idea?"

"Sure."

"W'at am it?"

"I 'lows ther boss is playin' fer Zeb Horn's mine."

"Sho!"

"Thet's w'at I think."

"W'at kin he want of thet?"

"Ther ole witch of ther Diablo Range tole him it was ther richest piece of propperty in these yar parts."

"But the cap'n can't work it."

"Why?"

"It'd be mighty onhealthy fer him."

"Don't you worry 'bout thet. You know he goes inter Silver in disguise 'bout w'en he dern pleases. He'd own ther mine as some feller w'at people'd never s'pect wuz Red Han'. I don't 'low he'd be roun' thar a great deal, but he'd hev it worked by a good crew, an' er man ter look arter it as he c'u'd trust."

"Wal, I'm blamed ef I dunno but ye're right!"

"I think mebbe I be."

"He probably means ter squeeze Zeb Horn tell he's glad ter make over ther mine."

"An' then—"

"An' then good-by, Zeb!"

The two ruffians laughed in a brutal fashion that aroused Zeb's anger, and he cried:

"Ther dastard Red Han' will find Zeb Horn er hard man ter squeeze!"

"Hello!" exclaimed one of the outlaws, in amazement. "Hanged ef he hain't waked up! Reckon we'll hev ter doctor him, Tony."

"Sure."

Then the horses stopped and a blindfold was placed over the fortune-seeker's eyes.

"Thar," chuckled an outlaw, "thet'll keep him

frum sp'ilin' his eyesight strainin' his eyes in ther dark."

"An' ef he wags his tongue too much," observed the other, "we'll hev ter tie that up fer a rest."

"Suttainly."

But Zeb had no care to talk with them. He was disgusted to think he had allowed himself an outburst. It would be difficult to describe his thoughts, which were very far from pleasant.

They rode onward for at least two hours after Zeb became conscious. He knew the latter part of the time they were climbing slowly but steadily upward over a rough trail.

At length there was a challenge, to which one of the outlaws replied in a peculiar manner, then they rode onward again, but were no longer ascending.

There was a change in the feeling of the air, and Zeb fancied they had passed underground. This was made apparent by the clattering echoes of the horses' feet.

For a long time they rode forward in that manner. At last they halted, and Zeb was released from the horse's back, but when his feet first touched the ground, he found himself scarcely able to stand. However, he was rudely compelled to march onward.

Through the bandage he saw a gleam of light that he knew was of artificial origin. This kept in advance for a time, but at length it paused. Then the bandage was rudely snatched from his eyes, and he was given a forward thrust that sent him staggering against a rocky wall, his hands still being securely bound behind him.

"Make yerself comfortable, ole man, tell Cap'n Red Han' comes ter see ye," called a mocking voice.

Then he heard a sound as of a heavy door closing, and the sliding of iron bolts.

He was alone in the darkness, and he knew well enough he had been shut into a dungeon-like apartment underground. His position was disheartening. In vain he struggled to burst the cords that held his hands behind him.

"My God!" he groaned. "Is thet dastard ter triumph, arter all? Kin sech er thing be? No! no! no!"

Slowly he backed around the wall, feeling with his hands for a sharp point of rock against which he could wear off the rope that bound him. His search was fruitless, and at length he gave up in despair.

It was some time later that the gleam of a light shot through an iron grating in the upper half of the dungeon door, and beyond the bar Zeb saw a mask that concealed the face of a man.

That man was Red Hand.

"Ha! ha! ha!" was the mocking laugh that came through the iron bars. "So I have a bird in my little cage! Well, well!"

Zeb Horn fell back against the solid wall and glared at the mask, no word coming from the lips that were drawn back till his teeth showed through his gray beard.

"By my faith! he looks more like a wild animal than a bird!" cried the Marauder. "He looks as if he would like to fly at my throat!"

"Then his looks don't guv him ther lie!" grated the prisoner. "Ef my han's wuz free, an' you wuz whar they c'u'd reach your throat, dastard dog, your minutes w'u'd be numbered!"

"Hanged if the thing can't talk!" chuckled the chief, in an evil manner. "I really begin to believe it is a man!"

Zeb ground his teeth till it seemed as if he would crush them in his mouth.

"You kin talk," was his retort, "but thar hain't no man erbout ye! You are a human devil o' ther wu'st sort!"

"You have more courage than judgment, Zeb Horn," and for the moment Red Hand dropped his bantering. "Is it possible you do not realize your position? Is it possible you do not know into whose hands you have fallen?"

Zeb struck the ground with a booted foot.

"I know only too well, murderer!" he shouted. "You killed my wife, an' fer thet act I will hev your blood!"

A scornful laugh came from beyond the mask.

"You talk like a fool, old man, but you will come to your senses after a time. If I killed your wife, it was an accident. It is nonsense for you to think of vengeance! What can you do? You are helpless in my hands. The Indian witch of the Diablo Range has told me your mine is very rich, so I have decided to possess it."

"You never shell!"

"I will squeeze it from you."

"You may squeeze out my breath, but I'll never guv up thet mine ter you."

"We shall see, old fool. I have a way of squeezing of which you do not dream. You have left your child in Silver, and you fancy she is safe. Ha! ha! ha! Even now I have ordered my horse, and within a few minutes I shall be on my way to Silver. When I return, the fair Kate will be with me. With her in my hands, I can soon bring you to terms."

A groan came from Zeb's lips.

"Dare ter tetch thet child," he shouted, "an' ther cuss o' God shell foller ye!"

But Red Hand had turned away with another mocking laugh, and the light vanished from the grating in the door.

With a great cry that seemed to come from a heart rent in twain by despair, the helpless prisoner fell heavily to the dark dungeon floor and lay there like one bereft of life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE VOICE OF A FRIEND.

How long Zeb lay in a state of semi-unconsciousness he could not tell. He was dimly aware that some one entered and left the rocky dungeon, and when he became himself once more he found his hands were free. The bonds had been cut while he was in the trance-like condition.

Part of a candle had been placed on the top of a boulder at one side of the dungeon, and beside it were bread and water. Zeb saw the food and drink, but for many hours he tasted neither. Like a maniac he paced up and down the chamber, muttering to himself, his eyes rolling, his hands clinched.

At last the candle began to splutter. Turning toward it, he saw it had burned to the rock and was on the point of going out. Then the food and water caught his eye, and for the first time he felt that he was devoured by a burning thirst.

With a spring, he grasped the canteen that held the water and lifted it to his lips. He did not lower it till the last drop had passed down his throat. As the canteen came down the candle died out, leaving him in darkness once more.

But the drink had made a new man of him for the time.

"I ought to have examined the place while I had a light," he said. "As it is, my fingers will have to be my eyes. I know well enough thar hain't no way o' gittin' out o' hyar, but thar hain't nuthin' like tryin'."

Round and round the rocky walls he went, feeling of almost every square inch with his fingers. He tried the door, although he knew it was secure.

"It is no use, jest as I thought. I am like er rat in er trap, an' I only wait ter be let out fer ther cat ter kill. Oh, such infernal luck! I shell hev ter hole myself ter keep frum beatin' my brains out on these rocks!"

Back and forth, back and forth, hour after hour he paced the dungeon in the darkness. Some rats came out of the walls and ran over his feet, but he minded them not. Every hour seemed a day. Once more food and a light was brought, and this time they were thrust under the door, there being a small opening sufficient for the purpose.

He had not eaten the first food brought him.

Zeb's first act was to lift the piece of candle and examine his dungeon. A thorough survey of the place only confirmed the opinion he had already formed. There was no way to escape without aid.

Aid! How could aid come to him? His friends would know nothing of his fate; his disappearance would be a great mystery. They could never find their way to the prison vaults of the Red Hand. Aid! He expected no aid from the outer world, yet he had not entirely given up hope. Hope is the last emotion to be extinguished in the human breast. When hope is gone there is little chance of life left. But he could not tell for what he hoped.

What if Red Hand returned with his child—his little Kate? The thought filled him with fury. What should he do—what could he do?

"Oh, God protect her!" he groaned.

He drank the water, but he barely tasted of the food. The man who had brought it came and looked in through the grating—looked in to see a man who raved and prayed and cursed by turns.

Thus the time passed. It seemed months to the prisoner. He felt that he must be growing very old; not much more of life was left for him. He seemed to have forgotten everything, and at times he wondered where he was and how he came there. Then it would all come to him, and once more he would rave and curse like one deranged.

Sometimes he ate a little food, but the water was always greedily devoured. After one of the sluggish spells when he fancied old age had crept so swiftly upon him, he would have a wild fit when he felt as if his veins were filled with liquid-fire and his head was a furnace. Then he would shout and sing and laugh.

It was during one of these spells that a light shone in at the grating of the door, and a wild voice cried:

"Daddy! daddy! daddy!"

That cry pierced his brain and cut his heart like a keen knife, for he knew the voice.

It was Kate—his Kate!

She was there with her face pressed against the cold iron bars, her hands thrust through, her arms outstretched to him. He reeled back a step, clasping one hand to his forehead and staring at her.

Kate—was that his Kate? Why was she there?

"Daddy—dear daddy!"

Yes, it was her voice! With a hoarse shout, he leaped forward and clasped her hands, cling-

ing to them and covering them with kisses, while he murmured brokenly:

"Kate—my little Kate! Oh, God! oh, God!" Behind her he saw a sable mask, and heard the sneering voice of Red Hand say:

"Old man, I have brought you your child!"

"You fiend!" he shouted.

The Marauder laughed, triumphantly.

"I kept my word."

There was fire in Zeb's eyes as he glared at the outlaw—the red orbs danced unsteadily in a way that gave Captain Red Hand a chill.

Then the prisoner burst out raving furiously. He still clung to Kate's hands—would not let them go. She called to him wildly, but he heeded her not—his eyes were on the dastard who had brought them all their sorrow.

"Don't, daddy, don't!" she sobbed. "You frighten me dretful! Oh, daddy, daddy!"

The outlaw chief fell back a step, gazing in amazement at his prisoner.

"What ails him?" he asked.

"I reckon he is going mad, cap'n," replied the guard, who was close at hand.

Zeb heard the words, and they did more to sober him than anything else.

"Take the girl away," commanded the Marauder.

Zeb clung to her hands, only releasing her when she cried out with pain. He felt like raving and cursing once more, but the fearful words of the guard caused him to restrain himself by a powerful effort. He pressed his face against the cold bars of iron and watched his child till she disappeared in the distance of the underground corridor and he was alone in the darkness of the dungeon.

"Am I goin' mad?"

Zeb asked himself the question, as he went back to a large boulder and sunk in an exhausted condition upon it. He feared he was truly losing his reason, and the thought filled him with horror untold.

For hours he sat on that boulder. He seemed bereft of will-power—he scarcely seemed to think. His brain was incapable of action.

What was that? A catlike footstep at the door—a cautious voice that called to him! An electric thrill ran over his body.

It was the voice of Soft Foot, the friendly Ute!

CHAPTER XXV.

A DESPERATE COWBOY.

ZEB HORN could scarcely believe his ears. Was it possible he heard aright? He dared not answer, but held his breath and awaited the repetition of that call.

It came.

There was no doubting this time, and in another moment the gold-seeker was at the door and had clasped the Ute's hand, which was thrust through the grating. The Indian gave his white friend a warm pressure, saying:

"Soft Foot followed the Red Hand to the town of the pale-faces and back to his roost among the mountains. He has come to save his white brother and the Golden Hair."

The Indian spoke in a cautious tone, and Zeb replied in the same guarded manner:

"You are er triumph, Soft Foot—darned ef he hain't! I'd sooner 'spected ter seen ther devil hyer then you—yes, er blamed sight sooner!"

"Soft Foot is here."

"But w'at kin ye do ag'in' all this gang o' bloody lan' sharks? Ther odds are erg'in' ye."

"Strategy will often defeat force. Time will tell what the Ute can do."

"Kin ye help me out o' hyer?"

"Perhaps so, soon; now I have not the key, and there is a strong lock, besides the heavy bars."

"How do ye know? You can't see."

"Soft Foot's fingers are his eyes when it is dark."

"By gracious! Soft Foot, ef you git me out o' this, I'll never forgit it!"

"The Ute will do his best. He hopes to save his white brother and the maiden."

"It is her I think of more'n myself, pard. Ef she is not reskied frum ther han's o' these devils, her fate will be ten times wuss then death."

"That is true."

"Whar be Old True an' them young cowboys?"

"Soft Foot has not seen them since he followed the Red Hand back to the mountains. How comes it my white brother is a captive here?"

The old fortune-seeker told his story as briefly as possible. When it was finished, the Indian said:

"The crooked pale-face shall not triumph in the end. He seems the victor now, but his time shall come as surely as the sun rises in the East. Soft Foot has no love for him, and hopes to see him crushed."

"Darned ef you don't guv me new life, Injun!" softly cried the captive man. "I reckon I wuz purty nigh gone daft, bein' shut up hyer erlone with my thort's; but now I feel as if thar is jest er leetle show fer me. But I don't understan' how ye ever passed ther guard at ther mouth o' this yar boel."

"Soft Foot deceived him with a trick. He hid behind the rocks near where the guard was

stationed, then he hurled some stones far down the ravine. The guard heard the sounds, but did not understand them. Soft Foot threw more stones, and then the guard went cautiously down to see what it meant. When he had passed, the Ute slipped into the cavern where he had seen Red Hand disappear beyond a screen of bushes with the captive Golden Hair. He was near enough to hear the crooked men talking when they came out of the passage that leads to the spot, so he learned where his white brother was confined, and he came here when they had gone."

"Soft Foot, you're er triumph!" cried Zeb, once more. "You hev putt ther heart right inter me, an' I feel like I wuz goin' ter git free an' beat ther Red Han' arter all. Ef I do, I reckon it'll be on your 'count."

"They said the prisoner was going mad."

"Thet's whar they wuz fooled, Injun. I reckon I did act er leetle out, but I'm all right now thet you hev come. Ther fire thet scorched my brain is gone an' I'm merself erg'in'."

"Good! Soft Foot did fear the crooked whites spoke the truth, but now he sees they were deceived. By and by they will learn their mistake, then they will hate themselves."

Zeb actually laughed, so elated had he become at the prospect of escape and defeating the outlaws.

"Hurry up, Soft Foot!" he exclaimed. "Git them keys an' let me out as soon as possible!"

"It will not be best to hurry too much."

"Ther quicker the better, says I."

"That might be wrong. It will be better to see what can be done for Golden Hair first. When everything is ready for her rescue then the pale-face brother shall be released. If he should be freed before that, the crooked whites might discover it, and that would ruin all, for then they would know some one had entered the cave. Then we should not be able to save the Golden Hair."

"Darned ef you hain't right, Injun! You hev got er long head on ye, and with you for a pard, I kin beat Red Han' in ther end."

"That is right, my white brother should keep up his courage. Soft Foot must go now before he is discovered. Wait patiently till he returns."

"All right, red-skin, only be as lively as ye kin."

"No time shall be lost."

The Ute gave Zeb another pressure of the hand, then Soft foot was gone, and Zeb settled down to wait patiently as possible.

Noiselessly the Ute threaded the passage till he came to the main chamber. There he halted and listened, but he heard nothing of a suspicious nature. He did not heed the rats that now and then scampered over the floor.

Soft Foot did not turn back toward the opening by which he had entered, but, keeping his hand against the wall, he moved in a direction that seemed taking him still deeper into the heart of the mountain.

For a long distance he moved forward, but, suddenly he halted. Ahead he had detected the glimmer of a light, and he knew some one was coming toward him. Of course it was one of the outlaws.

The Ute did not seem at all alarmed, but waited patiently till the rocks were seen by the glimmer of the torch and the outlines of the light-bearer were apparent. Then he glanced around for a place of concealment till the man had passed.

On one side the keen eyes of the Indian detected a mass of bowlders with a black recess behind them. His cat-like steps took him toward the dark place behind the rocks, and to his satisfaction discovered a secure hiding-place. There he remained till the torch-bearer passed, peering out to discover the man was bearing some food that was probably meant for the captive.

When the man with the light had vanished in the distance, Soft Foot went onward once more. He knew not where the great passage was taking him, but he felt he was getting nearer to Red Hand and his golden-haired captive.

At length he detected a light far ahead, but this time it was not an artificial one. There was an opening to the outer air.

When the Indian realized this he paused in amazement, for he fancied he had passed the point where Red Hand made his retreat—he was coming to the outer air again. For several minutes the Ute revolved the situation in his mind, but he could not arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. He finally decided to go forward cautiously and see if he was right in his suspicions.

As he advanced he became sure he was approaching the open air, for he felt a difference in the atmosphere of the cavern, and soon he found himself looking out into the basin that Old True Blue had discovered, where lay the outlaw camp.

To say Soft Foot was surprised, would not be doing justice to his feelings. He was quite familiar with the Mimbres, but never before had he known such a place existed as he found himself looking upon.

It was late in the afternoon, and the shadows lay heavily in the pocket. The outlaws were

moving about or playing cards near the buildings, all but a small number that were collected about their chief and the captive maiden who had been brought in. Kate was reclining in a rude easy-chair, and a handkerchief concealed her face. Red Hand was addressing those about him, and the Ute listened to his boasting words.

For a long time the Indian remained there, taking care not to be seen by his enemies. Suddenly he glided back into the deeper darkness and concealed himself behind a small boulder, where he lay curled into a very small ball, that looked like anything but a human being.

The Ute had been none too soon. His sharp ears detected a sound of voices away back in the darkness of the underground chamber, and he knew some one was approaching the outlaws' camp.

He was not mistaken, for soon three men appeared escorting the fourth, the last being a prisoner, his hands bound behind him. One of his captors carried a torch.

The unfortunate man was the cowboy, Hurricane Hal.

Soft Foot's eyes glistened, but no sound came from the small ball in the darkness close to the base of the boulder.

The captive cowboy walked erect, his head thrown back, his dark eyes flashing, not a show of humiliation in his manner. It was plain his aspect angered the men, for one of them cried:

"Ther chief'll take ther starch out of him when we turn him over!"

"Bet your boots!" replied another.

They passed on and the Ute sat up, his back against the boulder that had protected him.

"The Red Hand is getting some prisoners," he thought, but he did not express his thoughts aloud as a white man would be pretty sure to do. "It looks as if he would be triumphant, but the hour will come when defeat and disaster will be his."

When the three men and their captive passed out at the opening, Soft Foot started to follow; but he caught himself just in time, another footstep coming to his ears. Again the boulder served him as a place of concealment, and he saw the man go past who had carried the food to Zeb Horn.

Like a crouching panther, the Indian followed till once more he had obtained a position where he could look out into the pocket. There he saw the three outlaws escort their captive toward the knot where stood the chief, a black mask over his face.

At sight of Hal, Red Hand started and uttered a shout of surprise and delight.

"What have we here?" he exclaimed. "I'll be hanged if it is not the cowboy fool who has caused me so much trouble!"

Hal looked scornfully at him.

"You will be hanged anyway," he said.

At sound of that voice Kate Horn started up with a cry, and the cowboy saw her for the first time. His face blanched, and he would have reeled backward but for the hands of the men who held him at either shoulder.

"You here?" he groaned.

She held out her hands to him, a look of helpless appeal in her heavenly blue eyes.

"Yes, she is here," replied Captain Red Hand.

"By Jove! I almost believe you have a fancy for her! If so, so much the better. I will have the pleasure of giving you a little enjoyment in the way of seeing her become my wife."

"Dog!"

The chief laughed.

"Your rage amuses me!" he declared. "Oh, I will give you something to be furious over before long! Ha! ha! ha!"

That laugh seemed to arouse the cowboy to the greatest pitch of fury. With a wrench, he tore himself from the two men who held him on either hand, and a single spring took him from their reach. Then, with a mighty effort, he released his hands, seeming to twist them from the stout cords that bound him. Another spring took him to the side of one of the outlaws, and with a swift movement, he snatched a knife from the fellow's belt, sending him to the ground with a terrific blow of his fist.

Captain Red Hand uttered a shout of amazement and rage, but before he could prevent, Hal had reached the girl, snatched her from the chair and was retreating toward the cavern opening with her.

"Great Caesar!" cried the chief. "Look out for him, boys! Get between the fool and the passage! He is going to try to escape!"

The leader's shout brought the gambling outlaws to their feet, and a score of them came running from the various places where they had been. Six or eight placed themselves between the desperate cowboy and the dark opening he had for a moment hoped to reach.

Seeing he was cut off in that direction, Hurricane Hal turned toward one of the buildings, the girl hurrying along at his side. Just what he intended to do he did not know himself, but he was not going to give up as long as there was a ray of hope. Even when hope was gone he would not submit without a struggle.

Back in the opening of the passage the Indian, Soft Foot, was watching everything that passed, his eyes gleaming with admiration when they rested on the desperate cowboy. He longed to

take a hand in the struggle, but he knew it would be worse than folly under the circumstances. There was no possibility of escape for Hal and the golden-haired girl.

With one arm about the beautiful girl, the daring young cattleman placed his back against the wall, the knife gleaming in his right hand.

"Come on, you curs!" he cried. "You have the advantage of weapons, but I will make it mighty interesting for you all the same!"

"You fool!" cried Red Hand, striding to the front. "What do you think you can do?"

"Come on, and you will see!"

"We can shoot you down like a dog!"

"Shoot then!"

"Oh, but we do not want to do that. We might injure the girl."

"You shall never lay hands on her again while I have strength enough to wield this knife!"

"Now you are talking like a child! I should think you would know enough not to make such a fool of yourself."

"I wish you were within reach of my arm!"

"Without doubt."

"I would end your wretched life with a single stroke!"

Red Hand laughed.

"You hold a great grudge against me, but you are mistaken in your man," he asserted.

"I have made no mistake; you are the dastardly creature who murdered my mother!"

"It is useless to argue with you."

"Right, for I know you too well."

"I suppose you consider yourself that girl's friend?"

"Yes."

"Well, just now you are acting as her worst enemy."

"How?"

"By the position you have taken."

"Your words are not plain to understand."

"You have drawn her into the danger that menaces you."

Hal said nothing, but the girl clung closer to him.

"She may be injured in what follows," continued Red Hand. "You had better release her, if you care for her safety."

"She is at liberty to leave me any time she chooses."

"Come away, girl!" cried the outlaw, commandingly. "That young fool will be riddled with bullets in another minute. Get out of danger at once."

Kate gave the chief a look of scorn and loathing, but did not offer to stir. Red Hand stamped angrily on the ground, snarling:

"Your folly be on your own head! If you are shot, I shall not hold myself to blame!"

Then he motioned to one of the men near at hand.

"Bull's-eye Buck, try your skill on yonder living target!"

The outlaw addressed stepped to the front, drawing a long-barreled revolver from a holster at his hip.

"I'll spot him squar' atween ther eyes ef ye says so, cap'n," he grinned.

"Wing him, if you can."

"Ef I kin! Haw! haw! haw! Did ye ever see me miss, cap'n?"

"Never, Buck. Go ahead."

The revolver was lifted by a hand that was steady as an iron vise; but before the outlaw sharp-shooter could fire, Kate Horn uttered a scream and flung herself in front of her cowboy champion.

"Shoot!" rung clearly from her white lips—"shoot! but your bullet will have to pass through my body first!"

Bull's-eye Buck hesitated and lowered his weapon.

"Furies!" snapped Captain Red Hand. "This is time thrown away!"

The sharp-shooter looked at his chief inquiringly, but did not speak. Red Hand folded his arms and stood glaring through the twin holes of his sable mask. He seemed nonplused for the time.

Some words passed between Hal and the girl, and the cowboy seemed trying to gently move her aside. The outlaw chief took his cue from that, and cried, throwing all the scorn he could command into his voice:

"It is only the veriest coward that hides behind a woman's petticoats. Stand out like a man, if you have a man's blood in your veins!"

"Stand aside, Miss Horn," entreated Hal.

"I cannot put you in such danger!"

"No, no! They w'd take yer life!"

"But I am charged with cowardice, for they say I hide behind your skirts."

"But you are no coward! You are brave as noble!"

Her words thrilled him with a wild delight, for there was something more than admiration expressed by her tone and manner. Their eyes met, and at that moment each read a secret in the glance they received—a secret to them no longer! In another moment Hal was oppressed by the deepest despair, for he felt he had found the one being in the world he could love above all others—found her only to lose her again!

He scarcely knew what he said or did—he was not responsible for what he did just then. His arm was still about her, and he pressed her

closer to his breast, while his lips murmured, softly:

"My little darling!"

Her face had been white as snow, for she well understood their position, but of a sudden she blushed rosy red, and her eyes fell from his. She forgot where they were—she forgot everything but that this brave and noble man had called her his darling. She knew nothing of love, but a wild thrill of delight ran over her body, and she trembled in his clasp.

"Katie!"

He whispered her name.

"Yes."

She answered with difficulty.

"I love you!" declared the young man, having likewise forgotten for the moment that they were menaced by deadly peril. "Can you say you love me in return?"

She hesitated, but seemed about to speak, when the harsh voice of Captain Red Hand brought them back to a realizing sense of their situation:

"Coward, get from behind that girl, or she may be killed through your sneaking act! Do you wish to see her stretched dead at your feet?"

In a moment the cowboy replied:

"It were better she lay dead at my feet than that she again fell into your foul hands, loathsome devil!"

"If she is killed you will be as much her murderer as if your hand fired the shot!"

"You must stand aside, Katie!" firmly said Hal.

"An' see you murdered 'fore my eyes! Never!"

He attempted to reason with her, but she was firm in her resolve to protect him with her body. He had not yet resorted to main strength, but he saw it would surely come to that.

"There is no escape for me," he said. "It is certain death anyway."

"Then let me die fu'st! Strike that knife inter my heart! I prefer sech a fate ter ag'in fallin' inter ther hands o' ther monster that murdered my mother an' who swears I shall become his wife!"

"Kate, you are going mad!"

"No, no! I am simply sane ernuff ter know w'at my fate 'll be ef he gits me. Let me hev ther knife!"

She tried to wrench it from his grasp. He thrust her aside and fearlessly faced the outlaw.

"Shoot!" he cried.

Barely had the words left his lips when Bull's-eye Buck's revolver spoke, and the cowboy fell headlong to the ground.

With a shriek of anguish, the girl flung herself upon his body.

"Ha, ha! haw, haw!" laughed the sharp-shooter of the outlaws. "I downed ther critter, cap'n, but I only creased him. I kinder reckoned you'd like ter hev some more fun with him. He's better'n er hundred dead men."

But Red Hand did not stop to listen. He saw the crazed girl trying to get the knife from Hurricane Hal's nerveless fingers, and he well understood the dread purpose to which she intended to put it.

As he leaped forward, he shouted:

"She means to kill herself! Stop her! stop her!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS.

A GREAT cry of despair was wrung from old True Blue's lips as he felt himself going over that fearful precipice. Through the veteran's head flashed the terrible thought that all was over with him, but still he did not give up hope.

Casting his eyes downward toward the fearful depths, he saw a projecting point of rock almost at his very feet, and in falling he managed to clutch it with his fingers. His arms were nearly wrenched from their sockets, but still his fall was checked, and he hung dangling in mid-air above the black canyon bottom and its jagged rocks.

With the clutch of a man who feels that his life depends upon it, the Trusty hung suspended between life and death. To fall would be to go down to certain and instant death. But how could he keep from falling? His strength had been nearly exhausted in the struggle, and there seemed little hope of drawing himself up to the cliff.

It is impossible to realize the horror and despair that filled the man's soul as he was seized by the belief that he was really doomed. Life looked very sweet to him just then.

It happened he had seized the point of rock in such a manner and at such a place that he could obtain a firm hold. For all of that, it did not seem possible he could draw himself up so he could creep back to the cliff.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he gasped, "I callate yeou are done fur this time, Truman! Guess yeou have got ter go!"

He looked up at the sun and the clear blue sky and a shadow fell upon his face. It was that of the vulture who had so patiently waited for its feast.

"By chowder!" gritted the veteran; "yeou hain't goin' ter have my bones ter pick ef I kin

help it! Thar's er good meal fur ye down thar neow."

He looked for a crevice in the rock in which he could insert his foot. With such an aid, he might be enabled to reach the cliff.

There was none!

As has been said, the cliff was an overhanging one, and the wall was beyond the old man's reach.

But his eyes fell on something else, and a low exclamation of hope broke from his dry lips.

From the edge of the cliff dangled a mass of stout vines that were tangled in various manners. Into these he thrust his foot, feeling carefully for a place where the mass should be tangled sufficiently to give him some support.

He found it!

"Thank God!"

It was little wonder he felt thankful for the slight relief from the strain on his overtaxed arms. To himself he confessed he would have fallen in a few moments more.

But now was there any hope of escape? Would the support be sufficient to enable him to draw himself up over the verge of the cliff? There seemed but little chance for such a feat to be successfully performed.

"Never say die!" came huskily from the imperiled man's lips. "I hain't goin' ter give up till I have ter, yeou kin bet on that!"

He knew he must make the attempt to reach the cliff as soon as possible, for his strength would not hold out much longer, so he at once began to draw himself upward, exerting an amount of muscular power that was wonderful for one of his years. He did not dare bear too hard upon the vines for fear his foothold would give way and he could not obtain another, so he did as much as possible with his arms.

Old True's face grew crimson from the exertion, although it had been pale as that of a corpse a few moments before. Up, up, up! He felt the vines slowly giving beneath his feet, and the terror lest they should quite give way almost overcame him.

At length he thrust his head and shoulders above the brink of the cliff—he saw a crevice in the rocky path where he might fasten his fingers—he grasped for it with his left hand and—caught it!

At that moment he felt he was saved, but he did not give up the effort till he was fairly over the verge of that horrible fall. Then he fell forward on his face and lay like one dead in the perilous path along the mountain-side.

For many minutes the old man lay there without stirring. At first he seemed scarcely to breathe, and it appeared as if he had met defeat at the very moment of victory.

But Old True Blue was not dead. Before long he began to gasp for breath. For ten minutes he lay breathing hoarsely, then he stirred and slowly sat up to gaze around. There was a wild look in his honest eyes and his beardless face looked pinched and haggard. He had been very near to death—had escaped by a hair's breadth.

"Wa-al," he finally drawled, his good nature returning, "I callate I may be 'tarnal thankful I'm livin'. It did look 'zif I wur booked fur away over Jordan, an' that's facts! I hain't given ter prayin' much, but the good Lord kin jest accep' my thanks fer his kindness. I don't fergit he's good ter me, ef I don't make a spreadin' great show o' my 'ligeon."

Old True was thankful indeed, and in his heart he uttered more than one prayer of thanksgiving. It was the narrowest escape of his life.

After some time he crept to the verge of the cliff and looked over. Far down on the rocks of the dark gorge he saw a shapeless mass that he knew was the crushed and lifeless body of his late antagonist.

"Wa-al, I'm glad his blood hain't on my han's," he said. "That rock kem erlong at jest erbaout ther right time. That looks like ther work of Providence."

When he had fully regained his strength, he arose and started forward once more on the descent of the mountain.

"I'll alwuz have a horror fur that place," he muttered, as he looked back at the narrow cliff.

The Trusty found his horse just as he left him concealed at the foot of the mountain. He moved him to another place where he could graze at the length of the picket rope, having first given him a drink of water.

"Neow, old boy," he said, patting the animal's neck, "I'm goin' off fer a time. Ef I don't come back all squee, I callate yeou kin git erway 'thout er great deal of trouble."

Taking his lariat with him to be sure of a means of descending into the basin if he was not able to find the rope ladder he felt sure the outlaws used, he once more began the ascent of the mountain.

Old True did not hurry and darkness was settling before he reached the narrow ledge where the deadly encounter with the outlaw had taken place. He had also observed a dark mass of clouds that were coming up swiftly from the west, and he knew one of those sudden thunder-storms peculiar to New Mexico and Arizona was approaching.

The storm came on at race-horse speed. to use a homely figure, the lightning playing through the black clouds and the thunder rolling in the distance. Old Truman was anxious to reach and pass the narrow ledge before the storm struck. Darkness settled so densely that the mountain path became very difficult and dangerous of passage, although the flashes of lightning were of great aid to the lone man.

When the narrow shelf was reached it was so dark that True could only feel his way along when there was a bright flash of lightning. The thunder bellowed almost without cessation, and some of the louder peals seemed to shake the very mountains. Still not a drop of rain had fallen.

"Dunno's ther wet's goin' ter bit heur arter all," muttered the Trusty. "It'll be 'tarnal sing'ler ef it don't, but I swan ter man, I b'lieve it's goin' raound!"

He crept along the cliff, succeeding in passing it without much trouble. But then he began to look for a guard. He believed the man he had encountered on the cliff had been there for the purpose of guarding the trail, but another might have been sent to relieve him by this time.

As he was creeping cautiously forward the sound of voices came to his ears between the rumbling peals of thunder. This told him that there were other human beings near at hand.

In a short time he reached a point where he could peer forward and see two men, one of whom was seated on a small boulder, while the other was standing close at hand. They were conversing freely, seeming to have no thought of another besides themselves being present. Old True listened and was able to hear broken portions of their conversation.

"It's derved sing'ler 'bout Nat Joyce!" asserted the one on the boulder. "I hain't bin able ter find er derved thing of him."

"Think he's skipped—desarted?" asked the other.

"Hanged of I know! but he's gone. He wuz hyer ter guard ther trail, but—" Then came a peal of thunder that drowned his further words; but Old True Blue knew they were speaking of the man who lay at the bottom of the gorge.

"Nat Joyce hes gone to squar' his final 'count," he muttered. "He'll never come back this way."

When the thunder was still for a moment, the old man heard one of the outlaws assert:

"Joyce wuz allus considered 'suar' an' true ter ther gang. Ther chief trusted him as much as any other man."

"To this the others agreed.

After they had discussed the mystery of their comrade's singular disappearance for a long time, one of them observed:

"Ther cap'n's gittin' er few pris'ners on his han's."

"Shore," agreed the other. "But I hed ter look arter ther old gent—ther gal's father—ter-day, an' I reckon he hain't long fer this worl'. He's right on ther p'int of goin' mad."

"Holy smoke!" excitedly whispered Old True, striking his hands together. "Ef thet hain't Pard Zeb he's speakin' of, I don't know beans w'en ther bag's open!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

INTO THE BASIN.

THE Trusty now felt sure that Zeb Horn was in the hands of the outlaws. That the old fortune-seeker was still alive was plain, but from the words overheard, it was also evident he was far from well. But Old True believed that while there was life there was also hope.

For a few moments the thunder prevented him from hearing anything more uttered by either of the men, and a few drops of rain came pattering down. The venturesome old man began to believe there was going to be a heavy shower after all, even though the bulk of the storm seemed moving past to the westward.

"I don't keer," he muttered. "I kin stan' er wettin', so let her went ef she wants ter. I hain't nuther sugar ner salt, so thar hain't no show of my meltin'."

Once more he strained his ears to catch the words passing between the two outlaws.

"Reckon we'll hev ter crawl back under ther shelf rock," said one. "We'll be shore ter git wet ef we stay hyer."

"But kin ye watch ther trail from thar?"

"Dern ther trail! Who's comin' over ther mountain on sech er night as this?"

"Wal, I don't 'low thar'll be anybody."

"They'd be blazin' fools!"

"Sure."

"Kem on, then."

"Hole on, pard, she don't rain much yit."

Once more a thunder-clap drowned their words, and to Old True's dismay they did not stir toward the place of shelter.

"I hope it'll rain guns an' pitchforks within ther next ten minutes!" he thought. "I've got ter git past them critters somehaow, an' ef ther rain'll drive 'em ter kiver, it'll save me a 'tarnal pile of trouble."

"Ther chief scooped ther gal kinder slick," laughed one of the two outlaws.

"Now you're shoutin'!" was the response.

Old True opened his ears, an expression of astonishment being wasted in the darkness as it passed over his face.

"Ther gal?" he whispered. "Gosh all hem-lock! Can it be they mean aour gal—aour Kate? By glory! I cal'late it can't be her!"

But he was soon to discover his mistake.

"He struck fer Silver soon's he found ther gal's dad wuz hyer in ther mountains, but he didn't git er chance ter ketch her immejiately ter oncet," observed the man on the boulder.

"He ketched her easy ernough when he did git er chance."

"You bet!"

"Shot ther boy as was with her an' scooped her in."

"Yep."

"Cap'n says he was follered clean ter Silver an' back."

"Who by?"

"Ther red skunk thet hes bin sneakin' round these parts of late."

"Ther Ute?"

"Yep."

Once more the thunder kept their words from Old True's ears, and when it died away he caught the following fragment of a sentence:

"—safe back ter ther retreat with her."

A groan of dismay came from the lips of the listening man.

"What wuz thet?" cried the one on the boulder, starting up.

"What wuz what?" asked the other.

"Didn't you hear it?"

"I never heard nuthin' but ther thunder."

"Then mebber I wuz fooled, but it sounded jest like er human critter groanin' in distress. I tell you, Ferrin, you hev got ter stay hyer with me ter-night."

"Bosh, pard! Be ye skeered?"

"Naw, but I feels kinder boogerish."

"W'at makes ye feel so?"

"Wal, I 'low I dunno w'at's becum of Nat Joyce."

"You think—"

"Mebber he's dead."

"An' thet groan—"

"Wal, I don't jest b'lieve in spooks, but—"

Here the other broke into a hoarse laugh.

"Derved ef ye hain't skeered!" he cried.

The other protested he was not, but would not be satisfied till number two had promised to remain with him.

"That makes it 'tarnal bad!" thought Old True. "I don't want ter do no shootin', but haow am I goin' ter git ther best of both of them 'less I do? I'll have ter 'pend on the rain naow. Ef it don't come, I'll be in er 'tarnal scrape."

"Rain ur no rain, I've got ter go daown inter that pocket ter-night, fer it's plain both Zeb an' Kate is thar. Ther Red Han' hes got ther gal as well as her father, an' it lays with me ter git 'em aout of ther fix. By goldin'! I'm goin' ter dew my best!"

He always did his best; it was not natural for him to do anything else.

But he had not received his last surprise, by any means. When another peal of thunder was over, he heard one of the men saying:

"Ther cap'n's in luck, fer he's got his claws onter thet cowboy that hes bin botherin' him so much of late."

"Yep. I wuz one of ther three as ketched ther cow-puncher."

"So ye wuz! I'd clean fergot thet. How did ye do it? He's er mighty hard lad ter down."

"We fooled him inter thinkin' we wuz prospectin' fer gold, then we jumped him."

"Good job."

"Ther chief thought so."

"But he made a wild break arter he wuz got inter ther retreat, didn't he?"

"Hanged ef he didn't! I sw'ar I admired his sand!"

"An' I. He'd cut somebody bad ef Bull's-eye Buck hedn't drapped him."

"Ther gal kem nigh usin' ther knife on herself."

"You bet! Ther cap'n twisted it out of her fingers jest as she wuz goin' ter drive ther hull length of ther blade inter herself. I thort she wuz a goner."

"An' she thort ther cowboy wuz er goner. Reckon they're spoons."

"I reckon."

"Wal, he'll git er through ticket frum ther cap'n."

"Shore."

"I thort he wuz done fer w'en I saw him fall afore Buck's gun."

"Buck is dead sure ter a hair, an' he only shot ter crease ther cow-puncher, fer he reckoned ther cap'n wanted ter finish him off. Ther galoot wuz all right in hafe a nour."

"Thet's so, and he wuz—"

Again the thunder drowned their words, and another patter of rain came down.

"Great jizzilin' bamfuddled jeehossifat!" whispered Old True Blue to himself. "Whut shan't I heur next? That wur one of ther boys they wur torkin' abaout, an' I'll bet a squash it wuz Hal! Holy smoke! Kin I git 'em all aout of ther scrapes they hev fallen inter? Ef I do, I'll have er 'tarnal big job on my han's."

The two outlaws continued to talk, but they turned their conversation on topics that did not

interest the listener in the least. Old True waited and prayed for rain.

His prayer was answered by quite a little dash that came from the border of a cloud trailing past on the skirts of the storm, and a chuckle of delight broke from his lips as a flash of lightning showed the two outlaws hurrying away, presumably to the shelter of the rock one of them had spoken about.

"Neow," he muttered, rising from a crouching position, "I'll hustle fer daown below!"

Selecting a moment when he thought there would be little danger of exposure from the lightning, he hurried forward, having studied the lay of the land before he made the start. He did not make an error, and fortune was with him, for he passed the danger point without being seen or arousing any suspicions.

Slowly and carefully he felt his way down the trail, taking care to survey as much of the path as possible when it was revealed by the lightning. It was difficult enough, but he made no false steps.

Down he went till the bluff was finally reached, from which point he expected to get into the basin by means of a rope ladder, or by the lariat he had brought. He did not wish to use the lasso if the ladder was available, so he searched around for the latter.

He had begun to believe he would not find it, when a flash of lightning showed it as it had been drawn up and left lying on the shelf beside a round stone.

Long before this the rain had ceased to fall, the storm having swept around to the north, where the thunder still rumbled and the lightning played.

Old True found one end of the ladder was made fast, so he let the other end fall over the rocks. Then he was ready for the descent.

Before going down he made sure all his weapons were ready and in working order. He had left his rifle with his horse when he first climbed the mountain, for he did not wish to be incumbered with it.

Swinging himself over the brink of the bluff, the old man began the descent. From the collection of buildings came at times sounds of shouting and wild laughter, telling him the outlaws were having a carousal of some sort.

"All ther better!" he muttered. "Ef they keep it up an' all git drunk as owels I'll be tickled. It w'd help me out amazin'ly."

While he was descending the ladder there came a bright flash of lightning that seemed to set the whole northern sky ablaze, and for a moment daring Old True hung motionless on the swaying ladder.

"Ef thar wur any one out lookin' raound they may have spotted me then," he thought. "Waal, I must take my chancies."

He did not hesitate about completing the descent, for he would not have turned back had he known an armed outlaw was waiting for him at the foot of the ladder.

Some one was waiting for him!

Reaching the ground, he stepped from the ladder and turned to find himself confronted by a human figure dimly seen in the darkness!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE OUTLAWS' CAROUSAL.

LIKE a panther Old True Blue leaped at the throat of the man who confronted him, but he felt his wrists caught in fingers that had a grip of steel, and a familiar voice said, softly:

"The tall pale-face should go slow. He does not want to hurt a friend."

"Soft Fut!" exclaimed True, in relief and delight. "Is it really yeou? Haow did ye git heur, ye blessed savage?"

It was, indeed, the friendly Ute.

"Soft Foot has feet."

"Yaas."

"They brought him."

"Waal, haow?"

"By another road than the one over the mountains."

"I cal'lated so."

"There is a way to come under the mountains."

"Yaas?"

"Soft Foot followed the Red Hand."

"Good! I'm 'tarnal glad yeou're heur!"

"The Ute is pleased to see his white brother. There is work before us."

"I cal'late that's right. But yeou must have got ther lay of ther lan' daown purty well by this time ter be snoopin' raound like this?"

"I have."

"Waal, then, is it so that Pard Zeb is a pris'ner heur?"

"He is."

"Yeou know it?"

"Soft Foot has seen and talked with him."

"Thutter! Whar is he?"

"A prisoner in the passage that leads under the mountains."

"Waal, kin we git him free?"

"It is possible."

"Good!"

"But there are others—"

"The leetle gal—"

"She is also in the power of the Red Hand."

"Waal, we will save her ur bu'st aour b'iler tryin', Soft Fut!"

"The tall pale-face has spoken."

"Give us yer flipper on it!"

A red and a white hand met in the darkness, the compact was sealed.

"There is still another," said the Ute.

"Yaas; I heerd two of ther measly lan'-pirates torkin' 'baout him on the maounting. It is one of the caowboys, but which one?"

"It is Night Eyes."

"Hal, by gosh!"

Then Soft Foot told of the cowboy's desperate attempt to break from the outlaws and how he had faced the entire lot of them, armed with only a knife. The Indian spoke in admiring terms of the young man's courage.

"Oh, I cal'late he's built of ther right stuff!" chuckled Old True. "He's suthin' of a fly-away an' harum-scarum, but he's made of good squar' timber. T'other one is ther coolest of ther two, an' mebbe jest as brave, but he's a diff'runt kind. They make a 'tarnal good team!"

"We must save Night Eyes, or the Red Hand will slay him to-night."

"So?"

"So he has declared."

"Then ther lad shall be saved ef I have ter wade threw blood!"

"Golden Hair loves him."

"Hey? D'yer think that? Waal, waal! I dunno's I wonder, fer I took ter ther lad. He's 'baout ther same aige as my Jack 'd bin ef he hed lived, an' som times I think he looks 'baout as Jack 'd looked."

The old fellow brushed his sleeve across his eyes; and then added, in a different tone:

"Waal, we mus' git ter work, Injun. Ther lightnin' hes let up kinder somewhut, an' we sh'ud be movin'."

"Soft Foot has not dared approach the houses of the crooked pale-faces while the storm lasted, but now he is ready."

"Then lead on."

The red-skin took the lead, Old True following close to his heels. They moved directly toward the buildings from one of which came the sounds of shouting, laughter and song.

"Ther critters are havin' er high ole time ter-night," whispered True.

Soft Foot paused and laid a hand on his companion's shoulder.

"The Ute knows where Golden Hair is confined," he declared. "There is one man who guards her."

"Waal, we kin easy take keer of him."

"One must do it. He is within a hut, and three knocks on the door will cause him to open. Then he must be caught by the throat before he knows there is danger."

"Right yeou be!"

"While one is doing that the other can be releasing her father."

"That'll have ter be yeou, fer I w'u'dn't know whar he is. Yeou can show me whar ther gal is?"

"Yes."

"Then that settles that."

"All right."

They went on again.

As they approached, the singing and shouting of the outlaws were more plainly heard, and the sounds came from one of the largest buildings. Toward this Soft Foot led the way, saying he wished to look in upon them, for he knew not where the captive cowboy was confined.

Cautiously they approached the building, finally reaching a position where they could look through a window from which streamed a light.

The sight revealed to their eyes was a strange one. Thirty men were seated around a long table, upon which were spread the remnants of a repast. A dozen half-emptied decanters were on the table, and there was liquor in the glasses before the men. They were a wild, rough-looking set of fellows, bearded like pards, and flushed with the fiery liquid that had passed down their throats.

At the head of the table sat Captain Red Hand, and of all the men he was the only one who wore a mask. For some reason he had concealed his face behind a sable covering.

It was plain the bandits were making merry over the success of their chief. Toast after toast was called, all being received with cheers.

"They are whoopin' her up fer all they are wu'th," observed Old True Blue, cautiously. "I jest wish they'd git raousin' drunk!"

"If Soft Foot could drop a certain powder into ther liquor, we would be able to make them all our captives," asserted the wary Ute.

"Waal, by golding! I wish ye hed ther chance!"

"The tall pale-face does not wish so more than his red brother."

At length some of the outlaws called on their chief for a song. In a moment the cry was taken up, and it did not cease till Captain Red Hand arose to his feet, which act was greeted by a cheer that nearly lifted the roof.

"Sing the Robber's Life, cap'n!" cried one.

"Yes, yes!" shouted several others. "Sing it, an' we'll join in the chorus."

The Marauder of the Mimbres lifted a portion

of his mask till his mouth was exposed, replying:

"All right, my hearties; you shall have the song you want."

Then in a wild, strong baritone he sung the following lawless song:

"A roving life, a robber's life,
That is the life for me;
A jolly life, a merry life,
A life that's wild and free!
I love the lads whose hearts are true,
Who never dream of fear,
Who'll stand by me, whate'er I do,
Although it costs them dear."

"Then we'll drink to the robber,
Whoever he may be;
Fill up your glass, the liquor pass,
And we'll drink to the robber,
Whoever he may be!"

"A robber's life is full of strife,
Excitement makes it sweet,
It is a rollicking, reckless life,
It never yet was beat;
The mountain wilds they are his own,
He roves the flow'ry plain;
The gold he steals to winds is thrown—
He goes and steals again!"

"Then we'll drink to the robber,
Whoever he may be;
Fill up your glass, the liquor pass,
And we'll drink to the robber,
Whoever he may be."

"Where e'er he goes he fears no foes,
Though crimson stains his hand,
His strong right arm deals heavy blows—
Before it none can stand;
He halts the trav'ler in the pass,
Demands his purse or life;
If he resists, 'tis sure—alas!—
He leaves a widowed wife."

"Then we'll drink to the robber,
Whoever he may be;
Your glasses fill and drink with will,
With a cheer for the robber—
His life's the life for me!"

When the thirty men joined in the wild and roistering chorus, shouting it at the top of their lungs, they made a volume of sound that fairly shook the roof of the building in which they were seated. At the end of the song there was a wild cheer, and the glasses that had been filled were emptied in a trice.

Captain Red Hand resumed his seat, but he was not to escape so easily. The men called for him to sing again, and when they became persistent, he arose slowly to his feet. After a clapping of hands and stamping of feet, the men became silent.

"Boys," said the lawless wretch who had obtained such complete mastery over the greatest ruffians of the Southwest border, "I will sing an additional stanza to the song just rendered—a stanza of my own composing. I call it the Robber's Death."

"Hooray!" yelled one, waving a glass over his head. "We've had ther Robber's Life, an' I reckon ther most of us'll die er robber's death. Let her went, cap'n!"

This was the stanza and chorus Red Hand sung:

"A robber's death—he loses breath
And dies like other men;
Perhaps a palace shelters him
Perhaps a dungeon den;
Perhaps he dies as falls asleep
The child upon a cot;
Perhaps no one for him will weep
Though by a foe he's shot."

"Then a cheer for the robber
Who dies for want of breath;
Drink every man whene'er you can,
And a cheer for the robber
Who has no fear of death!"

"Come!" whispered Old True Blue to Soft Foot, when the song was finished. "They are half-drunk now, or I am er 'tarnal fool! Neow is ther time fer us ter git in aour fine work while they are raisin' sech er hill-roarin' ole racket. I jest hope they'll keep her up tell mornin'—yes, I do!"

"There is little fear they will discover us unless we are run upon by some one outside who is taking no part in the drinking," asserted the Ute. "Clouds still hide the moon, but the storm has passed and soon the clouds will be gone. We must work while we can."

CHAPTER XXIX.

OLD TRUMAN AT WORK.

TOGETHER Old True and his red pard moved from the building in which the lawless men were holding their carousal. They had seen enough to tell them the time for work had arrived and no minutes were to be lost. Plainly Red Hand was not nearly so much intoxicated as his men, but while he remained with them, his eyes were not to be feared.

Soft Foot led the way till he halted and pointed at the walls of a low adobe building to be dimly seen through the dense darkness.

"Golden Hair is there," declared the Ute. "One man is her guard. Does the tall pale-face think he can overcome him without arousing the others?"

"Waal, I kin come powerful nigh it, Injun.

Jest yeou let ther job aout ter me an' see haow I make it."

"All right; Soft Foot will trust to the craft of the pale-face. Remember, three sharp raps on the door is the signal. Then you must be ready to overcome the crooked pale-face before he sees who it is and gives the alarm."

"Kirect."

"Soft Foot will go to the passage and see if he can find the man who carries the keys to the place where Old White Head is confined."

"An' I—"

"When you have finished the guard, bring Golden Hair to the passage. Do you know where it is?"

"I saw it from the mountain."

"It is well."

There was a pressure of hands, then they parted, and the Indian glided away to disappear like a shadow in the gloom.

"As white er red-skin as ever breathed!" commented the old man to himself. "It hain't oftun a feller sees er white Injun, an' that's facts. They be all er treacherous, sneakin', low-down mess of critters—with once ur twice in a while an excepshun like Soft Fut. I sh'udn't wonder ef he an' I wur able ter sarcumvent ther hull pot an' b'ilin' of these 'tarnal aoutlaws an' git off with ther captives. Ef we only knowed whar Hurricane Hal wur, we'd be all right."

For a few moments he stood still in the darkness, then he muttered:

"Waal, neow I must buckle daown ter business. I don't want ter kill anybody ter-night ef I kin help it—an' I hain't goin' ter. I don't b'lieve in killin'; it's plumb ag'inst my principle; but thar are times wen er man mus' kill ur be killed. I hope thar won't be no sech 'casion ter-night, but I'm goin' ter git ther leetle gal free ur bu'st my b'iler tryin', by gosh! Heur goes!"

Straight toward the adobe hut he advanced, drawing a revolver from his holster. With the butt of the weapon he rapped on the wooden door, striking three times in sharp succession.

"Who's thar?" called a voice from within.

Old True repeated the knock.

"Who's thar?" roared the man. "Darn ye! can't ye hear?"

"It'sh me," replied the old man, speaking thickly, as if his tongue were paralyzed with liquor.

"Waal, who in blue blazes is 'me?' demanded the guard, approaching the door.

"Only jesht me," answered Old True, lurching heavily against the portal.

"W'at do ye want?" came impatiently from within.

"Want shee ye, pard."

"W'at for?"

Plainly the guard had a suspicion the man on the outside was not there on any particular business.

"Opun door an' I'll tell ye."

"Now w'at yer want ter come botherin' 'round heur fer!" snapped the guard. "Go 'long off, you drunken fool, ur I'll come out thar an break yer nose!"

"It'sh bushiness," asserted the man outside.

"Ther cap'n shent me."

"Ther cap'n sent ye?"

"Yaash."

"Waal, then I'll open ther door, but ef I find ye hev bin lyin', derved ef I won't break yer nose!"

The door swung open, and Old True seemed leaning so heavily against it that he fell forward staggering into the room.

"Hyur, you drunken dog!" cried the guard, catching him by the shoulder. "Brace up an' tell—"

His words were suddenly cut short, for a set of iron fingers closed on his throat and he found himself in the grasp of a powerful man.

"Oh-ho!" softly chuckled the Trusty. "I hain't hafe ser drunk as yeou thort I wur, pard! I'm able ter kick up a reg'lar he-ole raow, fer all of ther likker I hev bin d'rinkin'! Kinder tuck ye by s'prise, didn't I? Wa-al, wa-al! Thar's lots of fun floatin' raound ter-night—yaas thar am, pard!"

The man made a desperate struggle, but Old True had not miscalculated in any particular. In the first place, he was stronger than the outlaw, and he had obtained a wonderful advantage by taking the fellow by surprise. The outlaw's arms were pinned to his sides, while the fingers of his adversary shut off his wind and prevented him from making an outcry.

"Got ter come tew it, pard!" muttered Old True, holding fast, while the outlaw's face grew crimson and his eyes began to bulge. "This is er case of business pure an' simple. I'm 'tarnal sorry ter have ter squose yer woozle so 'tarnal hard, but I don't see no other way ter git at ther right conclusion of ther 'fair. I hain't goin' ter kill ye, but I'm goin' ter fix ye so ye won't yoop laoud ernough ter raise ther neighbors."

At length the outlaw fell limply into his arms, and he instantly lowered him to the floor, at the same time closing the door with a thrust of his foot.

"Don't want people lookin' in heur w'ile I am 'tendin' ter this case of s'pended anny-mashun," he laughed, kneeling beside the gasping guard.

"That's right, ketch yer breathe, pard, but don't ye try ter utter one leetle teeny tonty

yoop, 'less yeou are anxious ter j'ine ther chorus on ther Shinin' Shore, fer ef ye do make a howl, I'll tickle ye with tner hull length of this, so help me Bob!"

Before the eyes of the helpless man he flashed the shining blade of a long knife.

"Member I hain't goin' ter kill ye," continued the daring veteran. "I hain't ther feller as likes ter go raound killin' fer ther fun of it. I'm jest goin' ter truss ye up so you'll be puffec'ly still."

Feeling there was no time to be wasted, the old man cut some pieces from one end of his lasso, and at once proceeded to bind the outlaw. He worked with swiftness and skill, completing the job in a few seconds.

"Neow," laughed True, "fer a gag ter keep yer jaws still."

With a great effort, the outlaw gasped.

"W'at—gag—for? W'at—want?"

"Hello! Beginn'n' ter git yer torkin' apparatus inter workin' order, be ye? Waal, I s'pose yeou are thinkin' haow ye kin warn yer pards. Haw! haw! haw! I knowed it! Yeour face is jest like er book ter me."

"Neow looker heur, my frien', let me give yeou a slice of 'dvice that won't cost ye er darned cent: Jest yeou keep still an' let yer hair curl. That's ther best thing yeou kin do. If yeou yoop, I cut; ef I cut, yeou croak. Savvy?"

The man did not reply.

"Yeou might think of sacrificing yeourself an' gittin' me knocked out, but I callate yeou'd make a big failure in that. Jest lissen ter what neow!"

He was silent and both heard the wild shouts and laughter made by the carousing outlaws.

"Yeou hain't no fool," continued Old True Blue, after a moment, "an' so yeou kin understan' haow hard it'd be ter make them galoots heur any yell yeou might ef yer throat wur all right—which it hain't. Yeou'd have ter fairly split it fore they'd heur ye, then they w'u'dn't. As it is, yeou can't yell laoud enough ter be heurd aoutside this hut, so jest keep still an' have ther satisfacsun of livin' tell yeou are hanged."

The outlaw realized the old man had spoken the truth when he said it would be difficult to make the carousing bandits hear any cry that came from his lips, and he gave over the desperate resolve he had formed.

Meantime the veteran was busy fashioning a rude gag from a piece of wood he had picked up, and all the time he was working he kept up a running fire of good-natured talk.

"In course yeou wurn't 'spectin' me ter-night, but I don't alwus wait fer an invite. I heerd thar wur goin' ter be er leetle jubilee daown heur, so I call'ated I'd 'tend it, an' heur I am. I got erlong er jiff' late ter 'tend ther banquet, so I kinder thort I'd like ter drap in an' see yeou a few minutes. That's haow I kem ter be heur. But hanged ef yeou seemed ter keer 'baout seein't me! I had ter do all ther huggin' an' caressin'."

By this time the gag was ready, and True laughed as he inspected it.

"This is a new kind of bit that I'm thinkin' of gittin' a patent on," he said. "I kinder want ter try it fu'st, so jest open yer maouth, pard, an' take it in."

The outlaw protested, but he found his conqueror relentless.

"It's got ter be did. Thar hain't no way raound it, 'cept I kill ye, pard, an' I don't callate yeou'd like that a tall. No use ter kick. Keep puffec'ly cool an' kerlected, but open yer torkin organ an take in ther bit."

The guard was compelled to obey, and Old True made the gag secure.

"Thar," he said, with satisfaction, "that makes ev'rything all solid. I don't s'pose yeou'd howl neow if yeou wanted ter."

He arose to his feet and looked around the room.

"I don't see ther gal," he muttered, taking up the little oil lamp. "But she mus' be heur somewhar."

His eyes fell on a door and he advanced toward it. It opened before his hand, and the light shone into another room, falling on the figure of a pale-faced girl sleeping on a rude bunk, her tangled golden hair falling about her shoulders.

True had found the one for whom he sought.

Softly the old man advanced into the room and bent over the sleeper. The light showed her face was stained with tears, but utter exhaustion had caused her to sleep and forget her grief for a time. He noted the change in her appearance, and a sigh of pity came from his lips, for he had the tender heart of a child.

It seemed as if that sigh aroused her, for her eyes unclosed, she awoke and saw him bending over her.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE COWBOY'S PERIL.

A low cry came from the girl's lips, and she started up in mingled astonishment and alarm. Instantly Old True spoke to assure her: "It's only me, leetle one; don't yeou be skeered!"

She sunk back and stared at him wonderingly, hardly recognizing him at first.

"Don't yeou know me, Katie?" he softly asked.

Then she knew him, and with a sobbing cry of delight, she stretched her arms up to him.

"Uncle True—it's Uncle True!"

In a moment he had set down the light and clasped her to his breast, saying brokenly:

"Yaas, it's Uncle True, leetle gal. He has foun' ye, shore, an' he thanks ther Good Lawd!"

"Hev ye come ter save me, Uncle True?"

"Or die tryin', Katie!"

Suddenly she started again, saying fearfully:

"Thar's an outlaw in ther other room!"

"Yaas."

"How did ye git hyer? He'll diskiver ye, an' then all will be lost!"

"He diskivered me sevarial minutes ergo," chuckled the old man.

"Then let's hurry b'fore he guvs ther 'larm!"

"Oh, thar's no rush, leetle gal; he won't give no 'larm right erway."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"I've 'tended ter his case," he assured.

Then a shudder ran over her.

"You hev killed him?" she whispered, horror in her eyes.

"Nary kill, leetle gal. I jest squozed his thrapple tell he wur limp as a dish-rag, then I tied him up fer keeps."

"But he may guv ther 'larm!"

"Not tell he gits my bits aout of his mouth, so don't yeou worry 'baout that. I have gagged him."

A breath of relief escaped her lips, and in a moment her thoughts turned to something else.

"Daddy—you will save him?"

"We'll do ev'rything we kin, Katie."

"We?" inquiringly.

"Ther Injun an' me. Soft Fut, ther Ute, is heur with me, an' he has gone ter release yer father."

Her joy was expressed in her looks, but suddenly a shadow crossed her face. He saw it and asked:

"Whut is it, leetle gal?"

"Thar is—another," she said, falteringly.

"Ther caowboy?"

"Yes."

"We mean ter do all we kin fer him, too, but we have not bin able ter find whar he is so fur."

"He must be saved!" she exclaimed, starting to her feet. "I will not leave this yar place without him!"

"Got it!" nodded Old True, speaking to himself. "Ther Injun wur right; she's got it bad!"

"Thet demon will kill him ef he is not saved!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yeou mean Red Han'?"

"Yes."

"Waal, we mean ter save him ef it is possible, so yeou must trust ev'rything ter us. Yeou will do that, leetle gal?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Good! We won't lose nary bit more of time. Git ready ter go with me!"

She quickly found her hat and a Mexican serape, after which she announced she was ready. They passed into the other room, finding the outlaw where the old man had left him.

"Takin' it comfortable, I see," grinned True, as the guard glared fiercely at him. "That's right, make yerself as easy as possible, fer yeou may hev ter keep that bit in yer maouth ther hull of ther rest of ther night. I callate yeou'll 'member me."

The helpless man uttered an angry grunt.

"Can't seem ter tork very well, kin ye? Waal, that's too bad! Darned ef I meant ter sp'ile yer talkin' apparatus, but mebbe it'll do it good ter have er rest. We're goin' neow, so tatta, ole boy."

Before opening the door, he extinguished the light, which was a wise precaution, as it might have exposed them to their enemies when they passed out. Then, taking Kate's hand, he led the way from the hut, carefully closing the door behind him.

Old True lost no time in turning toward the place where he knew the passage opened into the basin close by the waterfall. The sound of falling water guided him, and he made no mistake.

A glance at the sky told the old man the moon would soon be out to keep company with the stars, which the drifting clouds exposed in patches. Within his heart he began to fear they would be unable to do anything for Hurricane Hal, but he did not express his fears to the trembling girl at his side.

The mouth of the passage was reached, and they were about to hurry blindly into the darkness when a figure appeared before them and uttered a warning hiss.

"My white brother has been successful," said the voice of the friendly Ute.

"Yaas," replied Old True. "Haow is it with yeou?"

"Soft Foot has failed."

"Failed?"

"Yes."

"How is that?"

"The man who has the keys to Old White Head's prison is not to be found."

"Great gosh all hemlock!"

"He is probably with the chief."

"Waal, whut be we goin' ter do?"

"Soft Foot has a plan."

"Name it."

"He has found a sledge, and he hopes to break the lock with it."

"That's ther stuff! Soft Fut, yeou are ther dandy! But haow 'baout ther caowboy?"

"While Soft Foot is getting the Old White Head free, the tall pale-face should see what he can do for Night Eyes."

"All right. Ef I only knowed whar ter find him I'd be all hunky."

"You must search; but do not stay too long from the passage."

"Never yeou mind me, Soft Fut. Ef yeou git ther ole gent free, jest yeou slide with him an' ther gal. Git aout as soon as yer laigs'll let ye, an' let me paddle my own canoe. Ef ther aoutlaws git arter me, I'll 'gree ter lead 'em on a diff'runt track, an' that'll give ye all ther more time ter git erway."

The Indian's hand touched that of Old True Blue in the darkness.

"My white brother is brave! Soft Foot is proud to call him friend!"

Old True actually blushed, but of course the color was not seen by his companions.

"Thar, thar!" he said. "Don't give me any of yer taffy neow! I'm goin' ter leave ye, an' I hope yeou'll have ther best of luck."

Kate's hand touched the veteran's arm, and her trembling voice whispered:

"Save him, Uncle True—save him an' I'll love ye alwus!"

"But it'll only be second rate affecshun," was his reply, as his rough palm gave her fingers a gentle pressure. "Yeou want ter fool ther ole man, but he's got two 'tarnal good eyes. Ef I save him, he'll git all ther cream of yer love, while I'll have ter take ther skim-milk."

"Now—now that hain't true!" she murmured.

"You shell hev my best love!"

"Waal, yeou kin feel sure I'll do all I kin fer ther lad, leetle one, fer I'm likin' him purty well merself. Ef it's possible, I'm goin' ter git him clear."

She pulled him down to her and kissed one of his rough cheeks before he knew what she intended to do.

"Thet's so much o' yer reward in 'dvance," she said. "Ef yeou save him, yeou shell hev lots more."

"Great jewhizzlin' gosh all hemlock!" he spluttered, in astonishment. "Yeou don't mean it, leetle gal! By thutter! I'll save thet lad ur bu'st my b'iler tryin'! Then I'll call on ye fer my pay, an' thar won't be no backin' aout—mind that!"

"Not a bit o' it, Uncle True."

"Then heur goes fer ther caow-puncher. Yeou trust ter Soft Fut; he'll take ye straight ter yer daddy."

They separated. Old True turning back into the basin and the Ute leading the girl into the darkness of the underground passage.

The old man walked straight toward the building from which still issued the sounds of revelry, for he felt a desire to look in on Captain Red Hand and his followers once more.

The building was reached, and as he passed around a corner, he came face to face with one of the bandits!

Old True's first impulse was to leap at the fellow's throat, but a second glance told him the outlaw was very drunk, for he staggered as he walked. He was one of the banqueters who had left the table for the open air.

Within the crafty head of the old man a plan was quickly formed, and in another moment he was staggering as badly as the outlaw. The two men came very near running into each other.

"Hello!" called the outlaw, thickly. "Zish ish great night, pard."

Old True only grunted, staggering onward.

"Hole on zere!" called the fellow. "Want ter talk wish ye, pard."

It was plain he took the Trusty for one of his comrades, but the old man did not pause. This seemed to anger the intoxicated fellow, for he gurgled:

"Go ter blazesh, dern ye! Needn't talk 'f yer don't want ter!" And then he resumed his crooked course, soon being swallowed by the darkness.

The venturesome old man congratulated himself on his escape from detection, laughing guardedly as he thought how he had fooled the liquor-muddled man.

"That wur er darned narrer squeak, jest ther same!" he was forced to admit. "I swan ter man I thort I wuz in fer a tussle w'en I saw him 'pear fore me! Even w'en I wur rollin' raound like er boat in ther troth of ther sea I wur all reddy ter jump fer his woozle ef he showed ary sign of sp'icion."

A few steps carried him to a position where he could look in at the window of the building. As he reached that spot he heard the sharp crack of a pistol, followed by a shout of approval and a clapping of hands. Then he saw Bull's-eye Buck standing at one end of the table, revolver in hand, a puff of smoke rising above his head.

Just beyond the other end of the table was the wall of the building, and tied with his back against the wall, his arms extended and his face turned toward the sharp-shooter of the outlaws, stood Hurricane Hal, a living target for the man to display his skill upon!

CHAPTER XXXI.

OLD TRUE PULLS TRIGGER.

A MUTTERED expression of anger burst from Old True Blue's lips as he witnessed the helpless position of the cowboy and the merriment of the ruffianly gang around the table. In the white wall close to Hurricane Hal's right ear was the mark of the bullet that had come from the sharp-shooter's revolver.

With folded arms, Captain Red Hand stood at one side, a sneering smile on his lips, his eyes gleaming through the holes of his sable mask, the bottom of which still revealed his mouth, remaining as he had arranged it when he sung the roistering song.

The cowboy displayed not a sign of fear. He scarcely seemed to notice Bull's-eye Buck, although in the hands of that individual lay his peril; his eyes were fastened on the chief of the dastardly gang, and there was fire in their dark depths.

"A very good shot, Buck," commented the captain; "but see if you cannot graze him a little closer next time. Make the fellow wince a bit."

"All right, boss," replied the sharp-shooter, and the man looking in at the window saw Bull's-eye Buck was so drunk he could scarcely keep on his feet. "I kin graze him clobber if I can shee ter do it."

After brushing his hand across his eyes, as if to wipe away a mist gathered there, the fellow deliberately lifted his long-barreled revolver.

The weapon on which Old True's hand rested left its holster with a sudden jerk and a second later its muzzle covered Buck's head.

"By gosh! I'd good mine ter salt him fer keeps!" whispered the veteran, to himself. "It's jest er darned shame ter let him pepper er way at ther boy, fer he is so drunk he may hit Hal 'stead of comin' clobber ter him."

But the better judgment of the old fellow kept him from pressing the trigger and sending the lead on its deadly mission.

"That might spile ther hull business. As long as they don't mean ter only spink raound ther boy I must hole myself in; but ef they go ter drorin' blood, some critter'll git hurt b-a-d, bad!"

Taking a careful aim, the sharp-shooter fired again, and the bullet buried itself in the wall more closely to the left ear of the helpless man than had its companion to the right. Still Hal did not start or turn pale—still he did not remove his eyes from the red-handed chief.

A murmur of admiration for the nerve of the captive came from the lips of the half-intoxicated crowd, but Captain Red Hand made a slight gesture of anger.

"By Moses! he's got ther nerve!" cried one of the men.

The chief broke into a sneering laugh.

"Is that what you call nerve?" he demanded. "That is not nerve at all. The fellow is frightened into silence; his tongue is frozen with fear!"

"You lie!"

The words were plain enough, and the helpless captive flung them straight into the teeth of the sneering bandit. Red Hand made a move as if to start forward a step, but caught himself and remained in his position.

"You lie!" repeated the cowboy. "Fear has not frozen my tongue! I have no fear of you or the dogs who acknowledge you as their leader, you human wolf!"

"You talk boldly enough, but I do not think you speak the truth," were the words which came from the chief bandit's lips. "You think it is the best thing you can do to put on a bold face, but that cannot help you now. You are in my hands, a prisoner, and there are none of your friends within many miles."

"Neow that's jest whar yeou fool yerself," muttered the man outside. "Old True Blue is raound, an' he's er holy terror w'en he gets started, ef he duz say so him own self."

"You are triumphant now," confessed the cowboy; "but your hour is coming—coming soon, at that."

"One thing is certain: You will not live to see it."

"I may not, but you will simply add one more murder to your list of crimes. Already your dastardly dog has sent a bullet along my skull within an inch of my life; let him complete the job if he will!"

For the first time, Old True noticed there was a bandage around Hal's head.

"That's whar he wur creased by thet critter!" thought the veteran. "Waal, turn erbaout is comin' fore long."

"The job shall be completed in time, I promise you," said Captain Red Hand, with a harsh laugh. "Do not be in too great haste, boy. You have bothered me a great deal, and I mean to have some sport out of you before I end your career."

"Sport! The sport of a miserable villain and coward!"

"You should put a guard over your tongue. For every such word that you utter, I promise you a minute of torture! Go slow, poor fool!"

"Your words show your cowardice! If you are determined to kill me, why not do so like a man? Kill me at once, and have it over!"

"You would be getting off too easy after all the trouble you have given me. I may spare you for some time."

"Then I will escape and have your life!"

At this the outlaw laughed sneeringly once more.

"You will have no chance. You have troubled me enough trying to take my life. What did I ever do—"

"You killed my mother!"

"You say I did, but that does not make it so. However, we will not discuss that point. The fun is growing tame and some of the boys are actually falling asleep. Buck, give us a few more samples of your skill. Spot 'em thick and fast! Don't be too particular about your aim, but don't draw blood till I tell you."

The sharp-shooter had thrown the empty shells from his weapon while the conversation was going on and replaced them with loaded cartridges. He now drew a second revolver, and with one in each hand, he opened fire.

Like a hailstorm of lead the bullets rained around the cowboy's head, pattering against the wall in a vicious manner. Buck worked both weapons in a wonderfully rapid manner, emptying them in a brief space of time.

During the ordeal the cowboy showed not a sign of fear. His black eyes were as wide open and defiant as ever, and he looked grandly handsome at that moment.

"Ef Katie c'd see him neow!" muttered Old True Blue, with a sharp in-drawing of his breath. "Great gosh all hemlock! he's a fu'st watter dandy!"

The rattle of shots had aroused the outlaws who were inclined to drowse, and they joined with their companions in a clapping of hands.

Not one of the bullets had struck more than an inch from the captive's head or neck, but not one of them had drawn blood!

"Very well done, Buck," spoke the chief, drawing a cigar from his pocket and calmly lighting it. "Load up again. Next time I want you to shoot off some of his fingers!"

This was hailed by a shout of delight from the bandits.

"Load up! load up!" they cried. "Let's see if the galoot'll keep his nerve when his fingers are being clipped off!"

"Waal," breathed the man outside, "neow I callate I will have ter take er hand! They don't dror blood on that boy ef I kin help it!"

Deliberately Bull's-eye Buck reloaded his weapons. Captain Red Hand blew out rings of smoke, a baleful light in his evil eyes, as he gazed upon his intended victim. Pretty soon the sharp-shooter was ready.

"Take his little fingers first," commanded Red Hand. "All ready—fire away!"

But, when Bull's-eye Buck lifted his hand to obey the command, it was Old True Blue who pulled trigger!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DARING RESCUE.

OLD Truman did not fire with the intention of taking a human life. His one thought was to disable Bull's-eye Buck, so the sharp-shooter would not practice any more fancy shots on the helpless cowboy.

With the crack of the veteran's weapon a howl of pain came from Buck's lips, and his long-barreled revolver fell undischarged to the floor. The man's companions were amazed to see him dancing around, holding up a hand that was shattered and dripping with blood.

"Oh, thunder an' guns! Oh, holy poker! Oh, fire an' brimston! I'm shot! Looker my han'—it's stove all ter pieces! Oh, great ginger!"

Buck's antics and bellowing cries were little short of ludicrous, but it was some time before the liquor-muddled outlaws could comprehend what had happened. Captain Red Hand was the first to understand the situation, and, snatching a revolver from his belt, he shouted:

"Buck has been shot by an enemy outside! Come on! Follow me!"

Straight toward the door he leaped, quickly followed by many of his men.

Old True Blue actually laughed as he witnessed the consternation he had created.

"That'll stir 'em up!" he muttered. "It'll be like er bumble-bee's nest heur b'fore shortly, an' I'll have ter look aout 'ef I don't want ter git stung hard."

When the chief of the Marauders sprang toward the door, revolver in hand, the old man decided it was high time for him to "make himself scarce," so he turned and ran back into the darkness for a short distance, pausing at the corner of a small adobe building.

"Ef they go whoopin' off torruds ther passage, I'll have ter lead 'em on er false scent in order ter give ther others er chainece ter git aout."

Of the half drunken outlaws the chief seemed the only man who knew what to do.

"Get torches!" he shouted. "We will scour every inch of this basin but we'll have the whelp that fired that shot!"

A sudden resolve came upon the old man—a resolve that seemed folly indeed.

"I'll do it ef they give me ther chainece!" he softly exclaimed.

He did not wait for torches to be procured,

but darted swiftly around the building. In another moment he had mixed in with the intoxicated outlaws, trusting to the darkness and his own shrewdness to escape detection. It was a most daring thing to do, but the old fellow was accustomed to daring deeds.

Mingling with the ruffians, he rushed lither and thither as if searching for some one, a revolver in his hand ready for instant use. Captain Red Hand was still calling to the men to get torches, and True knew that whatever he did must be accomplished before the lights were procured.

He moved gradually toward the building in which the bandits had held their carousal, and a glance through the window showed him Hurricane Hal still bound to the wall. A moment later the old man was at the open door, and he saw there was but a single man besides the cowboy within the room, and that man was lying on the table in a drunken stupor from which he had not been aroused by all the excitement around him.

"I'll do it!" gritted Old True Blue, and in another instant he darted into the building.

He thrust his revolver into its holster and drew a knife as he entered. His hat was pulled far down over his eyes, and the helpless cowboy did not recognize him.

Hurricane Hal saw a man come bounding in at the open door, knife in hand, and rush straight toward him. Then he believed some one had been sent to end his life, and he felt sure his last minute had come. Still no cry of fear came from his firmly set lips.

At the very moment when Hal thought the knife would be buried in his heart he saw it swiftly cutting his bonds, while a voice hissed in his ear:

"Foller me fer yeour life!"

Then he recognized Old True Blue!

There was no time then for an exchange of words, and Hal followed the old man toward the door, although he could scarcely comprehend he was not dreaming. It seemed marvelous indeed that the old man should venture there into the very heart of the outlaws' stronghold and boldly make the attempt to rescue a prisoner of the bandits when such a thing seemed an utter impossibility.

Reckless Old True Blue!

The old man himself was astounded at the success of his movements thus far, but he well understood they were not "out of the woods" by a long distance. This was made more apparent when they dashed out at the door, for one of the outlaws saw them and set up a wild alarm, while he sent several bullets whistling about their ears.

"This way, lad!" softly urged the daring man, and he led the way around the corner of a building, where for a moment they were safe from the bullets of their enemies.

"Jest yeou keep clobber ther heels I kerry, lad," was Old True's command. "I'll do my level best ter git yeou aout of this 'tarnal scrape yeou wur in. We'll git aout ur git salted fer good an' all."

"If I only had a weapon!" exclaimed Hal.

In a moment the veteran thrust a revolver into the cowboy's hand, saying:

"Heur you have it. We may have ter do some tall shootin' b'fore we git erway. Come on."

The other outlaws were following after the men who had seen the two dodging out at the open door, and all were coming in full cry like a pack of hounds.

Old Ballou succeeded in leading the way from one building to another without being seen, but beyond this second building lay the open section between them and the point where the rope ladder dangled over the bluff. It was nearer to the passage that led under the mountain, but the old man had not a thought of turning that way, as it would put those in danger who were trying to escape by that means.

With another word to Hal the daring man started on a run to the bluff. The cowboy followed at his heels.

Although the moon was still veiled by a bank of clouds, the stars were twinkling overhead and the darkness was not nearly dense enough to entirely conceal them from their foes.

Not many rods had been covered before a yell announced they were seen and bullets sung viciously about their ears. The outlaws were in hot pursuit.

"Peg it daown, lad!" gritted Old Truman. "We've got ter git thar an' climber rope-ladder b'fore they git under us!"

Hal was a good runner, but he had to exert himself to the utmost to keep up with the strange old man who had come to his rescue. As he dashed along, he cried:

"We are leaving Kate Horn in the grasp of these devils! Can we do nothing to save her? Let's turn back and—"

"What?" shouted the veteran. "Turn back? Don't be er fool, lad! come on!"

In a moment Hal slackened his pace a bit.

"You may go," he said. "I shall do what I can to save her!"

"Good grit, but derned fool jedgment!" was True's comment. "Come erlong, ef yeou don't want ter be riddled! Ther gal is with Soft Fut."

ther Ute, an' he'll do all he kin ter save her. We're loadin' ther 'tarnal lan' pirates on er false scent, as it war, wile ther gal, her dad, an' ther Injun are 'scapin' by ther passage at this blessed minute."

Hal uttered a cry of delight and in a moment was at Old True's side.

"Hustle erlong, ef ye kin trot any faster," advised the old man.

"Can't do it," was the reply.

All this time the outlaws were yelling in pursuit, sending bullet after bullet in search of the fleeing men.

"Ef they wurn't drunk they might hit suthin'," observed the reckless veteran, with a chuckle. "As it is, they shoot 'tarnal high."

They would hear the bullets whistling over their heads, and occasionally one would cut uncomfortable close to their ears.

"W'en ther ladder is reached," advised Old True, "yeou must go up fu'st, while I hold ther critters off."

Hal was not inclined to agree to this, but the veteran would listen to nothing else.

The ladder was reached, and to True's delight, it hung dangling down the face of the bluff.

"Up, up!" urged the Trusty. "Climb fer yer life, lad!"

Hal did not hesitate, and as he mounted the swaying ropes, Old True turned and opened fire on the approaching outlaws. The man was never calmer in all his life, and his first shot sent one of the foremost outlaws headlong to the ground. Shot after shot he fired until his weapon was empty, then he wheeled and ran up the ladder like a cat ascending a tree.

Hurricane Hal turned toward the outlaws the moment he reached the top of the bluff, opening fire with the revolver Old True Blue had given him. Although he did not look downward, he saw his companion more than half-way up the ladder.

But the outlaws did not intend to permit the two men to escape, even though the most of them had emptied their weapons.

"Follow them!" shouted Captain Red Hand. "Up the ladder, my lads! They will not be able to get away, for they yet have the guard to pass, and the trail will only allow them to advance one after the other. Up the ladder! up the ladder!"

Ever ready to obey his commands, the men leaped forward, and some of them reached the swaying ladder, for all of the shots of the cowboy on the brink of the bluff.

Suddenly the click of Hal's revolver told him every cartridge was exhausted, and he thrust the weapon into his belt, extending a hand that was grasped by Old True Blue, and the brave old fellow was pulled from the ladder to the bluff.

"Load, load!" was his panting command. "Ther critters are at aour heels! We mus' give 'em fire an' brimstun! Load! lad, load!"

Hal glanced down to discover one of the outlaws had already begun to ascend the swaying ladder.

"Give me your knife," he said calmly, extending his hand.

The Trusty passed him the weapon.

Without a word, Hal watched the man ascend the ladder till he was more than half-way to the top. Then, with two swift strokes, he severed the rope and sent the unfortunate wretch tumbling back upon his comrades' heads.

"There," he observed, as he passed the knife to Old True, "that ends the pursuit."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BLUE COATS APPEAR.

"RIGHT yeou are, lad!" chuckled the Trusty. "We have fooled ther 'tarnal pirates so fur, but we hain't clean aout of ther woods yit. Let's move back frum the aige of ther bluff heur, so we sha'n't make sech good targits fer them critters below."

They moved back, and Hal asked:

"What do you mean by saying we are not out of the woods?"

"Thar be two of ther critters away up 'bove on the maounting."

"So?"

"Yaas."

"What are they there for?"

"Ter guard this trail."

"And we must pass them?"

"Yaas."

"Well, we will find a way to do it."

"Sart'in."

"You said Miss Horn was being rescued by an Indian?"

"I did."

"Tell me about it while we are getting our breath. It seems so strange you should appear there at such a moment! Old man, you saved my life, and I shall not forget it!"

"Thar, thar! Don't be goin' ter make a fuss over er leetle thing like that!"

"But it was no little thing! It was a most wonderful thing! Even now I cannot understand how it was successfully accomplished. It seems impossible that such a thing could be done!"

"Wa-al, I reckon it wur more luck than anythin' else."

"I reckon it was more *pluck* than anything else. Not one man in a thousand would have dared attempt such a thing!"

"Wa-al, ter tell ther honest truth, I didn't know jest whut I wur goin' ter do w'en I bu'sted ther han' of that critter that wur goin' ter shoot yer fingers off. I didn't s'pose I'd git a chance ter rescue yeou then, but I wurn't goin' ter stan' raound and see him shoot yer fingers off—no, not by er darned heap!"

"And you put your life in danger to save my fingers."

"Mebbe so."

"That is just what you did. But tell me how you came there and how Miss Horn was rescued."

As briefly as possible Old True explained everything to the cowboy.

"Well, it was a stroke of fortune that you came upon the Indian after you entered the basin," asserted Hal. "I suppose he is to be fully trusted?"

"I'd trust Soft Fut with mer life, lad!"

"Well, he has a precious charge in his hands. If he should misuse her, I would hunt him to his death!"

"Thar, thar!" exclaimed the cowboy's companion. "Ther Injun cal'lated yeou wur dead broke up over her. Wal, I don't blame ye er 'tarnal bit, boy! She's er beauty, an' she'll make a blessed good leetle woman!"

Hal started to protest, but the old man hushed him in a good-natured manner, and just then the conversation of the outlaws beneath the bluff attracted their attention. Lying flat on the ground, they crept to the edge and listened. Plainly they heard the voice of Captain Red Hand saying:

"They will have trouble in passing the guard above. He can hold the trail if he tries."

"But he may not know what the matter is," put in another.

"We can give him the signal of danger."

"That's so."

"Go bring the horn," commanded the chief. Hurricane Hal turned over on his back, saying:

"Give me some cartridges, old man."

"Whut be yeou goin' ter do?"

"Load up and try a shot at that devil!" was the reply that came hissing from the cowboy's lips.

Old True passed him the cartridges, and also began to reload his own weapon.

Hal threw out the empty shells and swiftly slipped the loaded ones in their places. Then he turned on his stomach and cautiously crept nearer the brink till he could peer over at those below.

Red Hand was speaking:

"When we have given the guard the warning, we will cut those fellows off."

"How, boss?" inquired one of the men.

"I will select ten men and ride round to the point where the trail comes down. Then we will dismount and go up the mountain. As the fellows cannot pass the guard, we shall have them caught between two fires. They will be like rats in a trap! Ha! ha! ha!"

Hal softly cocked the revolver and took aim at the speaker, as well as the shadows would permit. He could see the dark mass of men below, and he was able to tell nearly where the chief stood. Without a word he touched the trigger.

The spiteful crack of the revolver was followed by a cry, and he saw one of the men fall to the ground. Instinctively the outlaws fell back, and Hal believed he had accomplished his object.

"A life for a life!" he cried. "Rebal Raguel killed my mother, and now I have taken his life in repayment?"

To his amazement, the voice of Captain Red Hand replied:

"You are a little off. You have winged one of my men, but I am still on my feet."

A cry of bitter disappointment broke from the cowboy's lips, and he immediately began firing shot after shot toward the point where he believed the speaker was, causing the outlaws to fall back with cries of consternation.

When he had exhausted the charges in his weapon, he listened. In a moment he heard the voice of the chief Marsuder calling down curses on the head of the one who had slain two of his best men. A groan came from Hal's lips, for this told him the man he hated was still alive and untouched.

The bandits had retreated to a point of safety, sheltered as they were by the darkness, and in a few moments the clear notes of a silver-toned horn awoke the echoes around. The two men on the bluff knew what it meant.

Captain Red Hand was warning the guard on the mountain.

"You say there are two of them up there?" said Hal.

"Yaas."

"How are we going to pass them?"

"We must find er way ur make it."

"That is right, and the sooner we are about it the better, for Red Hand means to cut us off. We shall be fortunate if we escape now."

Old True knew this was so, and he was now

ready for the climb, having regained his breath after his recent exertions. They started at once, creeping cautiously up the difficult trail, but making as good time as possible under the circumstances. Neither had settled on a plan for passing the guard above, but both were studying the problem.

They had not ascended more than half-way to the point where the guard was stationed before Old True suddenly stopped and laid a hand on the cowboy's arm.

"Hark!" he whispered.

They listened and plainly heard some one coming down the trail!

"It's one of them fellers, by gosh!" came excitedly but cautiously from the old man's lips. "He's comin' daown ter see whut ther matter with Hanner is! Holy smoke!"

Hal believed the Trusty was right.

What was to be done?

A plan flitted through Old True's head in an instant.

"We mus' capter him!" he softly hissed. "Ef we kin do it, I know haow we kin fool t'other one!"

The trail at that point happened to be favorable for the object they wished to accomplish, for the outlaw could not see them till he passed a point a few steps in advance. Right there the trail was wide enough for six men to pass abreast, but where it came round the rock it was very narrow.

"Lively!" whispered True. "We'll ketch him the minute he 'pears, an' he mustn't make so much as one leetle teenty, tonty yoop. Reddy, naow!"

They crouched like wild animals ready for the spring upon some unsuspecting prey.

The sounds of the approaching outlaw grew plainer and plainer till they knew the man was just beyond the rock. Then he appeared, and in a moment he was in the grasp of the two desperate men, Old True's hand being on his throat.

Not a sound did the amazed outlaw utter, though he tried to break from their grasp.

Fruitless effort.

"Keep still, darn ye!" hissed the veteran. "Ef yeou keep still, yeou won't be hurted; ef yeou don't, I'll shet yer wind off fer good, by golding!"

Seeing there were two of them, the outlaw comprehended how useless it was to struggle, and quietly submitted. Hal soon disarmed him, while the old man impressed on his mind the utter folly of making an outcry.

"We want ter use yeou," asserted True; "an' ef yeou do whut we want, yeou shall not be hurt er bit. Ef yeou don't—Waal, yeou had best say yer pra'r's ef yeou think of actin' contrary."

"W'at do ye want of me?" asked the captured man.

"We want yeou ter help us git past yer comrade up thar."

"W'at comrade?"

"Oh, none of yer playin' off! I kem over this maounting once ter-night, an' I know yeou hev got er pard up 'bove. Yeou have got ter help us git past him."

"How kin I do that?"

"Waal, don't yeou worry 'baout haow ye kin do it, fer I'll show ye haow."

"W'at ef I refuse?"

"Yeou know whut I jest said. We're goin' past ther guard somehow, an' it'll add ter yeour life ter help us."

The man decided he could not refuse under the circumstances, and a minute later Old True was once more leading the way up the mountain, the outlaw being at his heels and Hal bringing up the rear, a ready revolver in his hand.

The Trusty hurried, for he saw the moon was about to come out, and he hoped to reach the point where the guard was stationed before this occurred. To his dismay, he was unsuccessful, for the clouds rolled away and the moon was revealed long ere the crest of the trail was reached.

Old True called a halt for the purpose of discussing the best plan of procedure, but at that moment their attention was attracted by strange sounds that came from below.

At first there was a medley of wild yells, and the bright moonlight showed them men afoot and others on horses dashing hastily from the dark opening, that told where the mouth of the passage that led through the mountain lay. The cries were those of dismay, and the men seemed to be in the greatest consternation.

While the three men on the mountain-side were wondering at this, another strange thing occurred.

Out of the dark opening galloped a band of horsemen, who seemed in pursuit of the others. The clear notes of a bugle sounded the "charge," and with a wild cheer the horsemen swept toward the collection of buildings where the outlaws had taken refuge.

Then came the rattle of firearms!

"Great jewhizzilin' jumpin'-up gosh all hem-lock!" shouted Old True Blue, smiting his hands together in excitement. "Them fellers are Blue Coats, and they have 'tacted Red Han' an' his men, by thutter!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MET IN THE PASSAGE.

SOFT FOOT, the friendly Ute, led the girl deep into the darkness of the underground passage.

"Soft Foot knows where the white man who brought food to Golden Hair's father concealed his light," asserted the Indian, and halting, he stepped upon a stone that was invisible to the maiden's eyes and ran his hand along a rocky shelf.

It seemed as if the red-skin had the vision of an owl, for he quickly found a candle and a metallic match-safe. In a few seconds the candle was lighted by one of the matches his fingers removed from the safe.

"Now we have a light, Golden Hair," he said. "We will go to the Old White Head, your father. Here—" and his hand fell on a heavy sledgehammer concealed in a nook of the rocks—"is the key that shall unlock his dungeon door."

"My pore ole daddy!" breathed the girl. "Let's hurry ter him!"

The Ute led the way, soon turning into a side passage, and in a few moments they were before the heavy door of old Zeb's prison.

"The Ute has brought some one to see his pale-face brother," said Soft Foot, as he held the lighted candle so its rays shone into the dungeon.

A cry came from within, and in a moment Zeb Horn's haggard face was pressed against the bars and his cold hands grasped those of his child.

"My Katie—my leetle gal!" he exclaimed, his voice quivering with emotion.

"Oh, daddy, daddy!"

She could say no more, for her voice broke and she choked.

"How did ye ever do it, Soft Foot?" asked the imprisoned man. "How did ye git her frum them vampires?"

"There is no time to explain," replied the red-skin. "We may be followed at any moment by the crooked pale-faces. I must see what I can do to break the lock on this door."

Zeb knew this was true, and he urged the Indian not to lose a moment. Soft Foot passed the candle to Kate, and prepared to swing the sledge.

"May ther Good God guv yer strength an ther skill ter hit it in ther right place!" came from the lips of the trembling girl.

"Amen!" said Zeb.

With all the power of his muscular arms, the Indian dealt the blow, the sound awaking the echoes of the subterranean passage.

It was not effective.

"Hark!"

The word came from the girl's lips, and she held up one hand in a gesture of warning. The others were silent.

"W'at wuz it?" asked Zeb.

"I thort I heerd a shot out— *Thar!* w'at's thet?"

"Cries of the crooked pale-faces!" came calmly from Soft Foot's lips, as he prepared to swing the sledge again. "It means they have discovered the Golden Hair is missing!"

The words filled both the girl and her father with terror.

"Run, run!" cried the old man, excitedly. "They will be hyer purty quick an' you will be caught erg'in! Leave me! Save yerselves!"

The Indian looked inquiringly at Kate, and she said:

"Never! We will all go, ur I stay hyer with you, daddy!"

A look of admiration gleamed for an instant in the eyes of the listening Indian, and he spoke:

"The brave pale-face maiden is right—all shall escape, or none. But the tall pale-face has promised to lead the crooked whites on a false scent if they make a discovery. He will keep his word."

"Ther tall pale-face?" asked Zeb. "Who is he?"

"Oh, daddy! Uncle True is in there with all them horrid critters! They will kill him!"

Again Soft Foot used the sledge. Blow after blow he delivered, while sweat stood in huge drops on his face. Still the lock of the door withstood the assault.

"I'm 'feared ye can't bu'st it!" groaned the prisoner, in agony.

"Soft Foot has not lost hope," was the unfaltering reply, as the Indian paused to listen for sounds of the enemy. "His ears can hear nothing of the crooked pale-faces now, and that tells him the tall brother has kept his word. We have nothing to fear for a time."

"But ev'ry minute is presbus," asserted Zeb.

The Indian knew that, and he only rested long enough to get his breath fairly, then he went at the door again. He looked like some powerful giant of old as he swung the heavy sledge, the muscles playing on his naked arms and the great cords standing out on his neck. There was a look of grim determination on his dusky face.

Suddenly there was a loud snap, and a cry of joy came from the red-man's throat.

"It is done!"

Three seconds later the heavy door swung on its hinges and Zeb Horn came into the passage to clasp his child in his arms.

"Lose no time!" commanded Soft Foot.

"The crooked whites may come soon. Follow." He took the candle from Kate's hands and led the way. In a few moments they were back to the main passage. There Soft Foot halted and listened, then dropped on his knees and held his ear close to the ground. When he arose there was a set look on his face.

"Some of the bad pale-faces are coming!" was his startling assertion. "We must hasten!"

He led the way onward once more, and they followed. It was a long time before they paused again, but when they did Soft Foot did not bend to place his ear to the ground. He did not need to do so, for his keen ears plainly heard the sound of oncoming men—mounted men at that!

"They're comin'!" cried Zeb. "An' we hain't got no weppins ter 'fend ourselves with! W'at's ter be did?"

"We must try to get out first," declared the Indian. "They do not come very fast."

He led the way at a slow run, and Zeb assisted Kate along, although she needed none of his assistance, having been brought up in the open air to run races with the birds awing.

In that way they hurried on and on for a long time. It seemed as if they had traveled nearly a mile. Suddenly the Indian halted, a look of dismay passing over his face.

"W'at is it?" asked Zeb, noting his alarm.

"There are others ahead!" Soft Foot declared. "They are coming this way! We are caught between two parties!"

It is impossible to understand the consternation this statement created. What should they do? What could they do? The situation was terrifying.

"We must hide!" whispered the Ute, holding the lighted candle aloft and looking around. "That is the only way."

They knew he spoke the truth, and both followed when he led them toward some fallen boulders. The place proved scarcely suitable for their purpose, but it was the best they could see, and they hastened to conceal themselves as well as they could, the Indian soon extinguishing the light.

By this time the horsemen in front could be plainly heard, and there was evidently a large body of them. To the ears of the hidden trio came the sounds of jingling trappings, and a faint light glowed along the passage.

Still the other party had not appeared.

In a brief space of time the horsemen were opposite the place where the three were concealed. The Ute looked out and saw a sight that filled him with astonishment.

Instead of outlaws the men were a squad of U. S. Cavalry, led by Lieutenant Cranston. Many of them carried torches, and the light revealed Maverick Mat and the Indian maiden, Silver Tongue, in advance of all. The Indian girl was mounted on Mat's horse, but the young man was afoot, and in his hand he carried a revolver with which he menaced a villainous-looking ruffian, whose hands were bound behind his back.

Soft Foot's astonishment was so great he could not speak for a moment, but it was plain the ruffian under the cowboy's weapon was the guard that had been stationed at the mouth of the passage. In some way he had been captured, and Mat and Silver Tongue were leading the soldiers into the outlaws' stronghold.

When he fully understood this, the Ute gave a shout of delight and arose to his feet, exposing his person. In a moment he was covered by fifty weapons, but he cried:

"Hold! I am Soft Foot, the friend of the pale-faces!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BATTLE IN THE BASIN.

At a word of command from Lieutenant Cranston, the weapons were lowered, and Soft Foot was no longer menaced.

By this time old Zeb and Kate had arisen, and a cry came from the girl's lips as she saw the lieutenant and Silver Tongue. The Indian maiden echoed the cry, and left her horse for a place by the white girl's side.

"It is my lost friend, Golden Hair!" she exclaimed, giving the white maiden an affectionate embrace.

Of course there was a great amount of astonishment expressed on both sides, and brief explanations followed. But, while this was going on, Soft Foot uttered a cry and pointed along the passage. Every one looked in that direction, and they saw a band of mounted men halted in evident consternation and astonishment at a considerable distance down the great passage. Some of them carried torches, and at their head was the Marauder of the Mimbres, Captain Red Hand.

It was plain the outlaws were paralyzed with astonishment and consternation.

Quick as thought, Soft Foot and Silver Tongue drew Zeb and Kate back close to the wall, and at the same moment, Maverick Mat grasped the captive guard by the collar and ran him toward the other side of the passage, thus leaving the space clear between the soldiers and the outlaws.

From Lieutenant Cranston's lips came the order:

"Forward, charge!"

With a cheer, the men obeyed.

The outlaws did not wait to receive them. Like frightened sheep they wheeled and dashed back along the great passage, while the soldiers came in pursuit.

Fortune caused one of the Blue Coats to drop a torch, and this was instantly seized by the Ute.

"It is a better light than a candle," he explained.

With the outlaw guard still in his charge, Maverick Mat came forward from the opposite wall and joined them. They soon decided to follow the soldiers back into the basin.

Meantime Cranston and his men were pursuing the outlaws through the passage, driving them back to their retreat in the basin, where they would be caught like rats in a trap. The bandits were filled with terror and dismay, while their pursuers were exultant. A few shots were exchanged in the passage, but little harm was done to either side.

Out into the basin poured the outlaws, giving vent to their wild cries of alarm and warning. The moon had come out from behind the storm-clouds, and torches were dashed to the ground as soon as the darkness of the passage was left behind. The bandits made straight toward the collection of huts, where they gathered with the evident intention of doing what they could to repel the attack.

The Blue Coats were not far behind the dismayed Marauders, and they formed in regular order the moment they issued from the darkness of the passage. Then the clear notes of the bugle rung through the basin, and, with a ringing cheer, the Boys in Blue dashed forward, Lieutenant Cranston at their head.

Red Hand had formed his mounted men to meet and do their best to repel the charge, while those afoot were instructed to fire from any available cover. With the charge of the soldiers the outlaws opened fire.

Down upon the outlaws like a whirlwind came Cranston and his men. Two or three saddles were emptied by the scattering volley of the desperate bandits, and several men were wounded who did not fall; but the charge was not checked in the least.

Then Red Hand's voice was heard thundering: "Ready, men! Charge the Johnnies! Down with them!"

Out from behind a building swept the chief and his little squad of mounted men, and, with admirable courage, hurled themselves straight at the Blue Coats, firing as they came. The liquor those men had swallowed had apparently robbed them of fear, and the desperate odds against them did not seem to cause one to falter.

There was a shock as the two bodies came together, and then the battle was desperate indeed. With wild yells, the outlaws afoot came dashing out from behind the buildings, each selecting his man and making a savage attempt to repulse the soldiers.

The lieutenant's voice could be occasionally heard giving orders, and it rung high and clear above all the tumult. Not to be outdone, Captain Red Hand shouted his orders as loudly as his splendid voice would permit.

Weapons cracked on every hand, and the bright moonlight fell on flashing sabers that were soon stained by the deadly use to which they were put. Some of the soldiers were dragged from their horses and forced to fight afoot.

For a time the battle was uncertain, for, despite their inferior numbers, the bandits knew they were fighting with ropes around their necks, to speak figuratively, and they were desperate indeed. Defeat meant death, and the most of them preferred to die fighting.

"Hurrah!" rung out the penetrating tones of their chief. "Keep at them, my gallant lads! We'll wipe 'em out! It means death to be defeated! At 'em! at 'em! Hurrah!"

Inspired by his cries, the men made a wonderful battle, but fate was against them. Even when they saw the tide of battle was sweeping them to destruction, they continued to fight. Then, with ringing cheers, the Blue Coats pressed them harder and harder.

Some of the outlaws saw defeat staring them in the face and attempted to sneak away. At about this time the match had been applied to the wooden buildings in the pocket, and the bright light of the fires thus originated revealed the most of those who sought escape in flight. They were swiftly overtaken, captured or slain.

No longer was the voice of Red Hand heard urging his men on, and it was thought he had fallen in the encounter. The outlaws saw they were destroyed without doing any great damage to the attacking party, and that filled them with still greater dismay. The fires rose higher and higher, and their red lights revealed a thrilling scene.

The conflict could not last a great while, and at length the bandits threw down their weapons begged for mercy. Those who did this were taken prisoners, but there were some who fought doggedly till forcibly captured or slain.

Within thirty minutes after entering the basin the Blue Coats were the victors, and great was their surprise when they discovered the loss of life on their side had been comparatively slight, for the outlaws had made a desperate battle. Many were wounded, some dangerously, but few had been killed outright.

This could not be said of the bandits. Fortune had been against them, and almost half their number had fallen to rise no more. Among those captured, many were desperately wounded.

The light of the burning buildings illumined the basin in which the desperate conflict had occurred, and it was soon discovered Captain Red Hand was not among those captured or slain. At once it was known he had found some way of getting off without being seen, and the lieutenant immediately ordered a search for him to be made. If the chief escaped, the main object of the raid would not be accomplished.

It was probable the outlaw captain had some place of concealment known only to himself, for not one of his men had sought its cover. Red Hand, himself, was not found, although a vigorous search was prosecuted for hours. Once more the slippery and dreaded rascal had evaded his foes.

It is difficult to express how much Lieutenant Cranston was chagrined by his failure to capture or kill the Marauder of the Mimbres.

Before the search was completed Old True Blue and Hurricane Hal had returned to the basin, bringing a prisoner with them. It happened that Hal was seen alone by Cranston, and the officer gave an exclamation of astonishment and anger.

"Hello!" he cried. "How does it happen you are here?"

The cowboy did not like the tone in which he was addressed, and he replied:

"My feet brought me."

"None of your insolence!" cried the lieutenant. "I will not have it!"

At this Hal laughed, shortly.

"By gracious!" cried the now enraged officer, losing his head in his sudden fury. "I believe you were allied with these outlaws! I shall put you under arrest till I can make investigations."

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"Why not?"

"Because you are not able."

Hal's hand had fallen on the butt of a ready weapon, and the situation looked ominous when Old True Blue appeared. In a moment the veteran stepped between the two men, demanding:

"What's ther matter heur? I cal'late yeou fellers both need a 'tarnal trouncin'—I do, by gosh! What's ther raow?"

When the matter was explained to him, he burst out laughing in his good-natured way.

"Gosh all thutteration!" he chuckled. "That's all right, leftenant; I'll pledge fer ther boy. Holy smoke! But didn't I see him sot up by ther aoutlaws fer a targit, and they wur on ther p'int of shootin' off his fingers w'en I dipped in an' salted ther bacon of their sharp-shooter. Arter that I managed ter resky ther lad, an' we jest got 'way frum 'em by ther skin of aour eye-tooths. We wur up on ther side of ther maounting w'en yeou 'tacted ther varminits daown heur, an' we brought in an aoutlaw pris'ner, which same wur turned over ter yeour men. It's all right, leftenant."

"Oh, well," said the young officer, withdrawing with as much grace as he could command, "if you say it is all right, True, it is."

A few moments later Cranston witnessed the meeting of Hal and Kate, and he ground his teeth with rage.

"By gracious!" he muttered; "that girl loves the cowboy—and he loves her! That is sure! Hang it all! I believe I am in love with her myself! I thought her ignorant, but—but—what if she is unlearned? She will make a noble woman. Yes, I really believe I was inclined to overlook a prize. If I had only known my mind—But is it too late now? Perhaps not. That fellow is only a cowboy—a nameless nobody. Why should she prefer him to me? I will not give her up to him!"

Hurricane Hal had a rival—one that might prove formidable, if he chose.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LOVE AND JEALOUSY.

THE mid-day following saw the Blue Coats encamped with their prisoners many miles from the basin where the terrible conflict had taken place. Lieutenant Cranston had resolved to do his best to find Red Hand before he left the mountains, and, with that object in view, he had sent out nearly half of his men to search for the slippery outlaw chief, while the others remained at camp to guard the prisoners and attend to the wounded.

Strangely enough, Cranston himself chose to remain at camp, putting the searching party in charge of Old True Blue, who had been commissioned as scout. Zeb Horn, Soft Foot, Hurricane Hal and Maverick Mat went with the searchers.

The lieutenant had an object in remaining in

camp. Kate Horn was left in his care, having Silver Tongue as a companion. Cranston meant to watch for an opportunity to carry out his plan, and to improve such an opportunity should it present itself.

The camp was made near a cool spring that gushed from the rocks at the foot of a lofty mountain.

To the scheming lieutenant's dismay, the Ute maiden, Silver Tongue, scarcely left Kate's side for an instant. He wondered if his intentions had been suspected and the girls kept together for the purpose of baffling him.

"I will find a way to speak to her," he gritted, as his admiring eyes followed Kate's graceful form.

The girls did their best to alleviate the suffering of the wounded, showing equal kindness to Blue Coat or outlaw. When there was nothing more to be done, they wandered a short distance from the camp, but remained in full sight of the tents, and sat down together on a grassy bank.

For a long time they were silent. Kate gazed away at the blue sky beyond the mountain peaks, and the Indian maiden watched her wonderingly. Finally, Silver Tongue spoke:

"What can my white sister be thinking about? Her face is strange, for it is written with both joy and sadness."

Kate started and dropped her blue eyes to the dark orbs of her companion.

"There is both joy an' sadness in my heart, Silver Tongue," she sighed.

The Indian girl took her hand and held it close with both of her brown palms.

"Tell me," she entreated.

For a moment Kate hesitated, then she said:

"I will, fer I think I kin trust you. I wuz sad w'en I thought of my pore mommy, and of my own ignerence, fer I am ignerent, Silver Tongue."

"But you are white."

Something in the manner this was spoken caused Kate to look sharply at the Ute maiden, but Silver Tongue turned her eyes away. Silence came between them for a little space, then the dusky maiden spoke again:

"You have a secret, Golden Hair."

Again Kate started.

"A secret?"

"Yes."

"Hal ha!" the laugh did not sound natural.

"What kin ye mean?"

"You are in love."

"Me—me in love! Oh, now ye are tryin' ter chaff me, Silver Tongue!"

"No; I am in earnest. You are in love, for I have read it in your eyes. You love the pale-face of the raven hair."

A crimson blush suffused the white girl's cheeks and her head drooped. Silver Tongue tightened her grasp on the hand she held.

"I am right?"

Kate lifted her head with a despairing gesture, and cried:

"Yes, ye are right—ye are right! Oh, God help me!"

Astounded at this outburst, the Ute maiden knew not what to say. Seeing this, Kate went on, passionately:

"You hev 'larned my secret, Silver Tongue! It mus' be my face shows it! It is true thet I love, an' thet is makin' me more miserable then I sh'ud be!"

"That should make the white maiden happy."

"But it don't—it makes me anythin' but happy!"

"Why is that?"

"'Cause I am ignerent, Silver Tongue!"

"But the dark-eyed pale-face loves you."

"Do ye think so—do ye really think thet, Silver Tongue? How kin he love me? I don't know northin' skeercely! Mebbe he thinks he keers fer me now, but he'll change his mind by an' by—I jest know he will!"

"He will not."

Kate turned almost fiercely on her companion. "Don't ye tell me thet!" she hoarsely cried. "Don't you try ter fool me, Silver Tongue. Why sh'ud he love me?"

"Golden Hair is very beautiful."

"Beautiful—bah! What duz it all ermount ter? Nuthin'! I'm ignerent—I can't read ner write even! I don't know nuthin' o' fine manners! What is thar 'bout me but jest my face thet a man c'ud keer fer, an' ary man livin' 'd soon tire o' thet. It hain't jest her purty face thet keeps er man's love, I reckon! Thar's got ter be suthin' deeper—suthin' more! Oh, Silver Tongue, it is these thorts thet makes me miserable!"

Then the Ute maiden spoke, and her words filled the other with surprise:

"But you—you are white! What if you were an Indian maiden—what if color separated you from the one you loved? What if you saw the love-light in his eyes, and yet you knew he could never be anything to you? You are white—you can learn! You may be ignorant now, but in a short time you can obtain the knowledge you desire. But were you red, you could never change your color! Then—when you thought of that—you might despair!"

Kate looked at the Indian maiden wonderingly, for Silver Tongue seemed quite to forget herself for the time. Something like a knowledge

of the truth crept into the white girl's mind, and she murmured:

"You—you, Silver Tongue! Kin it be?"

"Why not? Did you think the Ute maid had no heart because her skin was not white? Ha! ha! ha!"—laughing bitterly—"she has a heart like her white sister!"

"And you—you love—"

"A pale-face!"

"I—think—I—know. It is Mat?"

"The Golden Hair has guessed."

"An' he—he loves you?"

"I have seen the light in his eyes. I know it! It is like the lightning that plays along the horizon—it gleams; it goes! I saw it flash when he looked upon me! I have felt the clasp of his hand, and it thrilled my heart! His touch was joy! I longed to feel his arm about me! Once he whispered in my ear! His breath was on my cheek and my bosom was ready to burst! He did not even touch me, but I could have died happy then!"

"Now, Golden Hair, think you yours is the greater grief? I have crushed mine into a dark corner of my heart and tried to kill it there! It will not die! An Indian can control the face, so my secret has not been read. You are white, but look at me! What pale-face that is noble and true would take me to his heart and own me his kindred as his squaw? Golden Hair, there is hope for you; for me there is—nothing!"

She bowed her head; her posture was one of despair. Around her shoulders fell her long raven hair. She would have made a glorious model for an artist.

Kate passed an arm around the Indian maiden and drew her close to her heart, while she softly whispered:

"Silver Tongue, we must hope."

Again the Ute maiden's passions seemed aroused. She flung aside her companion's arm, crying:

"Hope! You can hope, but there is no hope for me! I am red—"

"I reckon thar's white blood in yer veins."

Silver Tongue turned almost madly on the other girl.

"You reckon that; you do not know! I do not know! At times I have thought I was not all an Indian, but Soft Foot will not tell me."

"You don't 'member yer mother?"

"No."

"I reckon she wuz w'ite."

"But I have red blood in my veins—that is enough! No matter who or what my mother was, I am cursed!"

Silver Tongue sprung to her feet.

"I must go away into the mountains for a little," she said. "I must be all alone till I can control myself. The Golden Hair shall not be long without me."

Kate begged the Ute maiden not to go, but Silver Tongue was determined. In a few moments she was walking swiftly away, while the white girl watched her from the grassy bank.

Barely had Silver Tongue disappeared when Kate was startled by hearing a footstep near at hand. She turned quickly and saw Lieutenant Cranston before her.

"I beg pardon," he said, lifting his hat, gracefully. "I saw you being left alone, and I came out to join you. Where has the Indian girl gone?"

Kate explained that Silver Tongue had only gone away for a short time.

"I reckon I hed best go inter ther camp now," she said.

"Do not hurry," entreated the lieutenant. "I want to speak with you."

"With me?"

"Yes; I have something of importance to say to you."

Kate wondered what it could be, but Cranston lost little time in coming to the point. Taking a seat on the bank at her side, he fixed his eyes on her face, and said:

"I have only known you a short time, Miss Horn, but during that time I have formed a high estimate of your worth."

The girl was still more astonished, but she silently waited for him to proceed.

"You are very beautiful," he went on, deliberately. "It is seldom a girl is favored with all the charms that are yours."

Somehow her heart rose up in rebellion at these words, but she forced her lips to be silent.

"I trust you will not be offended at my frankness, Katie—Miss Horn—but I assure you I mean what I say. I have not seen you many times, but for all of that, I have learned to love you, and—"

"You—learned—ter—love—me!"

"I have," he asserted, trying to take one of her hands, "and I trust you may care a little for me in return."

She was too astonished to speak, but her blue eyes stared at him in a strange manner.

"I mean what I say, Katie," he assured. "I have learned to love you more than I can tell, and I want you to love me in return. I am willing and ready to do anything to win your love."

"Sir, I'm erfeered you hev made er mistake! You can't mean w'at ye say!"

"But I *do* mean it! Will you become my wife, Katie?"

"Your wife! Me! You can't really mean that—you w'u'dn't marry me?"

"But I would—I *will*, if you will only say the word! Now, don't put me off! I am sure you can love me if you will try, and I will do my best to make you happy!"

She arose to her feet, despite his detaining grasp.

"I thank ye, sir," she said, brokenly. "I thank ye fer doin' me so much honor—I really do! But I can't ever be yer wife!"

He was on his feet before her.

"What makes you say that?" he cried.

"Because it is the truth. You may be in 'arnest now, but ye will see ther time w'en ye'll be glad I didn't take ye at yer word. I am only er pore gal, an' I'm not fit ter marry er fine man like you. No, no!"

"Is that your reason? Well, it only shows the nobility of your nature! But you deceive yourself! You are fit to become the wife of any man!"

"An' putt him ter shame with my ignorance an' bad manners! I never will!"

"But you can learn—you are yet young. There is plenty of time for development. You are so handsome that—"

She put out one hand and checked him with a gesture.

"Ef I wuz hombly w'u'd ye want ter marry me?" she asked.

The question confused him for a moment, but he managed to stammer:

"You are not homely—you are beautiful!"

"An' it is thet ye car' fer, leftenant—I see it in yer eyes. Oh, you don't know how big a mistake ye are makin' in thinkin' you *love* me fer my good looks! W'at be good looks, anyhow? They are nothin'! Ther rose kin fade from ther cheek, ther light from ther eye, ther lips kin lose ther arch, an' ther figger change; then, w'en beauty is gone, w'at is left? No, no, leftenant, you mus' not fool yerself!"

Her words only made him the more determined.

"I am not deceiving myself," he asserted, firmly; "I love you truly. Will you become my wife?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't love ye."

This only staggered him for a moment.

"But you can learn—you surely can!"

She shook her head.

"No, I can't."

He thought of her apparent admiration of Hurricane Hal, and in a moment his good judgment was gone.

"You love another!" he cried, accusingly.

Her eyes fell and the blush came to her cheeks once more. The sight was too much for him.

"Your looks confess it! I know your secret—I know him! It is that cowboy! Can it be you prefer him to me? What is he? A common cow-puncher—a nameless nobody! I can scarcely believe you can prefer such a man to me!"

His words and his conceit angered her and filled her with sudden scorn. She threw back her head, her blue eyes flashing.

"He is a *man*! What right hev you ter dictate me? Ef I chose another, w'at is it ter you? I kin talk with ye no longer! Let me pass, sir!"

But he put out his hand and detained her.

"Hold on a minute," he said, his voice low and his face black as a storm-cloud. "I have a few more words to say."

She stepped back and shook off his hand.

"Then say 'em quick, an' git it over!"

"I want to warn you."

"Of w'at?"

"Of the cowboy."

"Wal?"

"Who is he? Nobody knows! He has deceived even Old True Blue, but I fancy I know him."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"He pretends to be Red Hand's worst foe, but that is only a mask to deceive. He is, or was, the outlaw's most trusted spy. He gave the bandit warning when he was in danger. He—"

"Hold on thar!" cried the girl, commandingly. "You know better then thet, leftenant! You are only sayin' thet ter hurt him in my eyes! I kin read you! I did think ye quite er man, but arter this I kin never think anythin' o' ye! My respect fer you is gone, an' wuz you ther last man in ther worl', you c'u'd never be anythin' ter me!"

As she swept past, he hissed:

"All right, Miss Horn; have it so if you choose, but you will yet be sorry! You shall not marry Hurricane Hal, if I can prevent!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SLEEK SAUL REAPPEARS.

SILVER TONGUE returned to camp after an absence of two hours, and no one could have suspected from her appearance why she had left the place.

Near night Old True Blue and the Indian, Soft Foot, appeared.

They brought a prisoner with them.

It was the gambler, Slick Saul.

The card-sharp looked anything but sleek just then. His clothes were torn, his hat gone, and his hands and face scratched and bleeding, while he looked nearly famished. In truth, he was almost perished of hunger.

"Ther Injun an' I got kinder separated from t' others," explained Old True, "an' by happenstance we run onto this critter. Soft Foot ketched him, an' he wur nigh starved, so we toted him fer camp. Ther others have instrushuns ter come in by dark ef they don't see northin' of us."

"You have done well!" exclaimed the lieutenant, in delight. "This fellow is Red Hand himself, and I have him in my hands at last!"

At this, Soft Foot stepped forward.

"This pale-face is *my* prisoner," he declared, firmly.

Cranston passed the matter over as unworthy of discussion, but placed the gambler under Blue Coat guard. Saul was given water for a bath, and then dried beef and hard-tack made a meal for him. He ate ravenously, showing his hunger was not assumed.

The Ute did not think much of having Saul placed under other guard than himself, but he did not protest. However, he did not lose sight of the prisoner for a single moment.

It was some time after nightfall that the soldiers came in. Hal, Mat and Zeb being with them. When Hal was informed of Soft Foot's capture, he uttered a cry of joy.

"The man is Rebal Raguel, my enemy!" he declared. "He killed my mother, and his life is mine! Where is he?"

They led him to a tent where the gambler was calmly sleeping under guard, but the soldiers would not admit him.

"Whar's ther leftenant?" demanded Old True, angrily.

"In his tent," was the reply.

A few moments later the cowboy was face to face with the officer.

"I wish to see the man known as Slick Saul," he said, after he had saluted and received a blank stare in return.

"Then it is quite probable want will be your master," was the grim reply.

Hal's face flushed.

"You refuse to allow me to see him?"

"Yes, sir."

Old True Blue muttered something emphatic.

"Look heur, leftenant," he said, "is that jest right?"

Cranston looked at him inquiringly.

"What do you mean?"

"Yeou know this lad has a claim on ole Red Han', an' it can't be yeou mean ter keep him frum squarin' counts?"

"The man is my prisoner."

"Not by er darned sight!" was the old man's fearless answer.

The young officer's face grew dark, but he asked:

"Do you mean to say he is not?"

"That's jest whut I mean, by gosh!"

"But he is in my hands and under guard, sir," and it was plain Cranston had to struggle to hold his anger in check.

"That may be, but who wur it that captered him?"

The lieutenant did not reply.

"It wur ther Injun, Soft Fut," asserted the fearless veteran. "Ther feller is Soft Fut's captive."

A harsh laugh came from the officer's lips, and he said:

"Look here, True, have you come here to teach me my business? We have been friends, old man, but there is a limit beyond which you can step."

The Trusty glared at Cranston as if he would annihilate the important officer.

"Neow yeou look heur," were the words that fell from his lips. "I have alwus thort yeou wur er 'tarnal smart sort of a feller, Cranston, but thar is sech er thing as a critter gittin' too smart fer his business. I'm er plain man, an' I don't keer er gosh darn fer ther best feller that ever stood on two laigs—that's me! I know right frum wrong, an' I know good judgment frum pore. I know you kin claim that feller as yeour pris'ner, but will it be ther right thing? Thet's ther question. This young feller's mother wur killed by ther brutal treatment of that man, an' fer y'ars ther boy hes follered him ter squar' ther score. Neow ther chaine has come, be yeou goin' ter step atween ther two? All Hal asks is that be kin have an ekil sho', man ter man, with ther snake. He don't want ter 'sassin'ate him, but he duz want ter meet him in an even fight. Be yeou goin' ter prevent it?"

For several seconds the lieutenant was silent, his face working strangely. A new thought had come to him. If the cowboy and the gambler met in an even duel, might not the cowboy be the one to fall? If such a thing should happen, he would be easily rid of a dangerous rival.

"Duty is duty, True," he finally said. "I was sent out to capture or destroy Red Hand. The wretch is in my power—"

"But he hain't yeour pris'ner."

"I acknowledge the force of your argument; still I fear to relinquish my grip on him. By so doing, I might lose my commission. Once

he has slipped through my hands, I cannot afford to have such a thing happen again."

"It sha'n't. You shall have him, livin' ur dead, ter kerry with ye."

"How am I to be sure of this?"

"I pledge yeou my word."

"But this 'duel—what if this fellow, the cowboy, is killed in the engagement?"

"Then yeou'll have all ther better chaine of takin' Red Han' back ter ther fort erlive."

The lieutenant rested his head on his hand and seemed to be thinking deeply for several minutes. At length he said:

"I will let you know my decision in a few minutes. I must have time to think the matter over."

They understood him, and promptly withdrew from the tent.

The moon was hanging above the eastern peaks when Cranston appeared.

"Look here, True," he said, "there is another man who has a claim on the prisoner."

"Who's that?"

"Zeb Horn."

"That's so," confessed the veteran. "But I'll tell yeou whut we'll do: I'll pick six of yeour men, and them as has claims of ther feller shall argy ther case afore them six men. Then ther one as them men say has ther fu'st claim shell meet ther Red Han'. Whut do yeou say ter thet?"

"I will agree on one condition."

"Name it."

"If the outlaw meets and defeats this man, he is then to become my prisoner."

"Wa-al, I call'ate they'll all 'gree ter that."

"Then pick your men, and we will move down the gulch away from the camp. The trial and what will follow will not be a pleasant thing for the young ladies to hear and witness."

"Right yeou are, leftenant. I call'ate Red Han' 'll pass over Jordan afore ther night is much funder advanced. Great gosh all hemlock! This is a reg'ler raound-up an' wipe-out! I'm glad I'm heur ter see ther job completed as it oughter be—I am, by gosh!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

OLD TRUE BLUE STEPS BETWEEN.

Down the gulch about half a mile from the soldiers' encampment a strange scene was being enacted. The moonlight streamed into the gulch at that point through a gaping break in the rocky wall, and by its light more than a dozen men were revealed. They had gathered in a little group around a common center.

The central object of the gathering seemed to be a man who was calmly smoking a cob pipe that had been loaned him by one of the men who acted as guards over him.

It was the cool gambler, Slick Saul.

The card-sharp had been brought there for the purpose of deciding the point as to who had the first claim on him.

Hurricane Hal was there, looking as if he longed to fly at the throat of the man he hated so bitterly, but was holding himself in check.

Zeb Horn was also there, and the looks he bestowed on the wretch he believed was the murderer of his wife was enough to chill the blood.

Slick Saul seemed to mind neither of these men in the least.

Lieutenant Cranston stood at one side, and occasionally he darted a sullen look toward the dark-faced young cowboy—a look he was careful to keep from the notice of those around.

Old True Blue, Maverick Mat and Soft Foot were among the throng.

The men were there for the purpose of determining who had the first claim on the gambler, and six of the soldiers had been selected to decide the question.

Cranston made the first argument, setting forth his claim as fully as possible in a brief space of time, and he really made a plausible argument.

Through it all the card-sharp smoked as tranquilly as ever, not a muscle of his icy face betraying any emotion that he might have felt.

Soft Foot next stepped forward. His words were few, but right to the point. His eloquence was brevity itself, but it was plain his claim did not impress those who heard him. Red Hand had stolen his child and tried to kill him, but he had saved Silver Tongue and defeated the outlaw. If the Marauder was brought to justice, what more could he ask, even though his hand did not deal the fatal blow?

Zeb Horn made the next argument. His words were uncouth and his manner unpolished, but every word went straight to the heart. He told of his happy home, of his wife and child, of the things he held dear. In his homely manner he painted scenes that touched the tender chords in the breasts of those who listened.

At length he told how the child had dreamed of her mother's death—how the mother had also dreamed of such a terrible thing, and even as they were speaking of their dreams the Red Hand had come upon them. The outlaw had attempted to tear the girl from her mother's arms—had stricken the poor woman down with a brutal blow! Then, when she sprung up and did her best to defend her child, he had mercilessly murdered her—shot her dead at his feet!

At this point there were groans and fierce mutterings of rage! The men glowered on the gambler, but as calmly as if in the midst of bosom friends Sleek Saul continued to smoke. He did not appear in the least disturbed or alarmed.

Old Zeb continued. He told of the search for the body of his wife and the finding of a fleshless skeleton. He told how he had tenderly buried it without allowing his child to look on it. He told how they had prayed above the grave and how he had registered a solemn vow to avenge the woman's death.

When the old man had finished it was plain he had made a strong impression on those who were listening.

Hal next stepped forward. He began his story by telling how the wretch who sat before them had ruined his mother's life by leading her to believe she had been deserted by her husband. Then he had induced her to fly with him and live as his wife. She consented in case there was a marriage, but after she had lived with the man a while he told her the marriage was illegal. That had nearly killed her.

Hal told the whole black story down to the time when his mother's death was caused by a blow from the fist of her betrayer. He knew he could spare none of the most repulsive details, for Zeb Horn had made a strong case, and he must make a stronger. His greatest point was that the crime against him had been committed before those against the others, and for that reason he held he had a prior claim on the outlaw. This he urged upon those who were listening as judges.

It happened that Hal was not situated so he could see Old True Blue's face during the story. Had he been able to do so, he might have stopped in wonder. The expression on the veteran's face was unreadable.

At length the arguments were over, and the six judges were called on to render their decision. Up to this point Sleek Saul had remained silent, but he now arose to his feet.

"I believe it is customary to give a man a chance to speak for his life," he said, in deliberate tones. "I have listened without a word to the charges against me, and now, in simple justice, I ask a chance to defend myself."

At first the men were inclined to listen to nothing from the gambler's lips, but some cried out that it was no more than fair, and the party settled down to listen, asking Saul to be as brief as possible.

"You have taken me a prisoner and charge me with being the outlaw known as Red Hand," he began. "But what proof have you I am the Marauder of the Mimbres? You have none save the word of yonder cowboy. Even he has not told you how he knows I am the bandit. He has said I am, and that seems enough for you. Is that right?"

"If I am not Red Hand, I am not the person Lieutenant Cranston is looking for. If I am Red Hand, I did not attempt to kill this Indian and steal his child. If I am not Red Hand, I did not murder this old man's wife and kidnap his child."

"I am not Red Hand! This I swear to you! This cowboy swears I killed his mother. That I could have done, even though I am not the outlaw, but I did not do it! I—"

"Liar!" burst from Hal's lips. "I know your face! There is no use in your denying that crime! Even though you are not Red Hand, you are the man who killed my mother! You shall not escape my vengeance!"

"Very well," came icily from Sleek Saul's lips. "If there is no way to convince you of your error, I shall have to meet you in a duel and kill you! The others cannot demand such a meeting of me till they have proven beyond a doubt I am Red Hand."

That was true, and the men saw it in an instant.

"I can give you an account of all my acts, if you wish to hear of them," added Saul; but it will be time wasted. After I have killed this fool, who is determined to take my life, I will prove to you I am not the Marauder. Give me a weapon and let me meet him."

The six judges held a brief consultation, and then they decided Hurricane Hal had the first claim on the gambler. From that moment preparations were made for the duel.

Old True Blue looked on like one dazed. He seemed stunned, but his eyes followed the movements of the young cowboy, and there was a strange light in their clear depths.

The weapons were selected, and the conditions named and agreed upon. Out of formality, each man selected his second, Saul choosing one of the soldiers. Hal named the Indian, Soft Foot.

Weapons in hand, the two men faced each other in the moonlight that streamed through the wide break in the wall of the gulch. There was a look of determination on Hal's countenance, while the gambler's face was as cold and unreadable as ever.

Cranston was to give the signal. He stepped forward, saying:

"You are to fire at the word. I will count three, beginning now. One!"

A great hush fell on the spectators and the duelists raised their weapons.

"Two!"

Old True Blue caught his breath with a convulsive gasp, and then plunged forward, placing himself before the young cattleman, crying hoarsely:

"Hold on! You kin shoot me, but not my boy—my Jack!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SOME SURPRISES

THE old man's words and movements filled everybody with amazement. What could it mean?

No one was more astonished than Hurricane Hal.

Had Old True Blue suddenly gone mad?

Seeing their looks of amazement, the Trusty cried:

"This is my boy—my own son that I thort wur dead! That man thar is ther man who lured my wife astray! I am Truman Ballou who went to California to make a fortune in the mines, but failed! I left my wife at home, and she went away with another man, taking aour child with her. I follered an' tried ter rekiver ther boy, but it wur not with her, an' she said it wur dead. Neow I know she deceived me, fer I have heerd this lad's story, an' he is my own son, Jackson Ballou."

"That is in truth my name," confessed the young cowboy. "But can it be possible you are my father?"

"I am yeour father, Jack!"

It was no time for a show of affection, but their hands met in a warm grasp.

"Father, the time has come to avenge our wrongs—yours and mine," said the cowboy. "Stand aside and let me end the life of this villain who did the foul work that made us strangers so many years!"

"No, no, Jackie, boy! Ef that is ther man, then he is my meat! It is not fer yeou ter meet him; I am ther one ter which he sh'u'd settle. Stan' aside, lad, an' let me use one of my guns on ther devil!"

But the cowboy would not hear to this.

"I have run him down, father, and he is mine. Everything is ready for the duel. Step back, please."

"Never, Jack, never! He will kill yeou! I mus' do ther job!"

"That is impossible, for you are shaking with excitement and could not hit a steer at that distance. Yonder wretch is cool as ice—"

"An' will put er bullet straight threw yeour heart of yeou face him. I'm an ole man, Jack, an' I hain't much more good fer this worl' anyhaow; yeou are young with all of life b'fore ye. It's my place ye are standin' in."

Sleek Saul had been standing like a statue, waiting for the scene to pass. He now spoke, in his cool, taunting manner:

"Have I got to meet the whole family? If so, stand out one by one, and I will polish you off. This is getting mighty monotonous."

Once more Hal, as we shall continue to call the young cowboy, appealed to his newly-revealed father, but Old True Blue was obstinate. He was determined his boy should not fall before the deadly fire of the gambler.

At length, Cranston exclaimed:

"Come, come! Further time cannot be wasted on this wretched affair! I feel as if I am not doing the right thing in letting it go on at all. The young man is the one to meet the prisoner there, and if he does not face him, I shall take Red Hand in charge myself. That will end the business, for when I again close my grasp on the Marauder, he goes to the fort with me."

Even this failed to move Old True.

"I had ruther see him end by hangin' then ter hev this duel go on," he said to Jack. "Ef he—"

There was a startling interruption at this point.

From the darkness further down the canyon came a clatter of iron-shod hoofs, a wild shout, the rattle of firearms.

Into the moonlight dashed a masked horseman with the bridle-rein swinging loose on the neck of his steed. A revolver was in either hand, and the butts of the weapons were clasped by hands incased in blood-red gloves!

"Red Hand! Red Hand!"

That was the cry that went up from the amazed throng.

"Yes, Red Hand!" shouted the wild rider. "Fools! You have the wrong man!"

Then his revolver flashed, and men reeled back before the spiteful rain of lead poured upon them. Soft Foot was among the first to fall, but he immediately struggled up on one elbow and opened fire on the reckless outlaw.

For a few moments it seemed as if Red Hand bore a charmed life. Straight up to Sleek Saul he swept, stooping and catching the gambler by the hands that had thrust his revolvers out of sight a moment before. With a surge, the card-sharp was flung across the saddle-bow in front of the daring bandit.

"Good-by, fools!" derisively shouted Captain Red Hand, as his gallant horse bore him onward again, taking Sleek Saul along.

But he was not destined to escape. Soft Foot had risen on one knee, and, with a nerve of iron, he steadied his weapon and fired.

With a wild up-flinging of his arms, the Marauder of the Mimbres plunged from the saddle, Sleek Saul going to the ground with him, while the riderless horse went dashing onward and disappeared in the darkness beyond the break through which the moonlight streamed.

A yell of delight came from the lips of those who had witnessed the fall, and a rush was made toward the spot where the two bodies lay.

Sleek Saul was but partially stunned, and he sat up as they gathered around him. His face was marked by a look of astonishment and wonder.

"Neow," cried Old True Blue, "neow we have Red Han' anyhaow! One of these critters is ther right one, by gosh!"

"Strip the mask from his face!"

"Let's have a look at the fellow!"

"Unmask him! unmask him!"

These were the cries.

Cranston bent over the man who had been tumbled from the saddle by the bullet of Soft Foot, the Ute. With deft fingers he unbound the sable mask, asking some of the men to stand aside so the moonlight would fall fairly on the outlaw's face. They did so, and a cry of astonishment broke from their lips as they saw the features revealed.

The man was Sleek Saul's double!

No one showed more surprise than the gambler himself.

"My God!" he cried, his face losing its iciness for once. "Can it be possible?"

For a few seconds the spectators were too astonished to speak, but at length the lieutenant demanded of Saul:

"Who is this man?—what is he? Which of you is Red Hand?"

"He is my twin brother!" replied the card-sharp. "I thought him dead years ago! But this is surely he!"

"And he is Red Hand?"

"It must be, for I am not the outlaw."

At this moment the wounded man opened his eyes.

"Yes, I am Red Hand," he said, faintly. "My time has come! I am fatally wounded. The cursed bullet is in my vitals!"

"And Soft Foot placed it there!" said the voice of the red-skin, who had dragged himself to the spot. "Now he can die without a murmur, but his soul would have been restless had you escaped."

The Ute sunk down near the man he had shot, and it was seen he was bleeding profusely from a wound in the side. In a moment friendly hands were dressing the injury as well as possible under the circumstances, it being found the bullet had plowed its way clean through the Indian's body.

The acknowledged chief of the border outlaws turned to his brother, who was bending over him.

"Saul," came gaspingly from his lips, "I had resolved to do—my best—for you. I knew they would—kill you if I did not save you—some way. I did not want to give up—my own life, so I tried to rescue you. But now it is—all over. They can do you—no injury now."

The man's injuries were examined and pronounced fatal. He had but a short time to live, and he knew it.

"Nat," said the card-sharp, kneeling by his doomed brother's side and taking his hand, "I thought you dead. There was a notice of your death in the paper sent me by Joe Given of El Paso."

"That was a hoax, Saul. The officers—were hot after me for killing—a man in self-defense, and I was forced to do—something. That was why the dead dodge—was played. Given thought me dead."

"They say you are fatally wounded now."

"I know it."

"Before you die you must clear me of the charges against me."

"What are they?"

In a few words the gambler explained. When he had finished, the dying outlaw broke into a laugh that was anything but musical.

"I am Rebal Raguel!" he asserted.

Hurricane Hal bent eagerly over him, demanding sternly:

"Will you swear to that?"

"Yes. Why should I lie, for I know—I am—dying? I fear none of you—now. I am the man who—lured Hester Ballou—astray. Wretch that I am, I suppose—it was my brutal treatment that—killed her! I have lived a wicked life—a wicked life! At times I have thought it a glorious life—to live; but now it fills me—with horror! I am dying—dying! In a little while—I shall stand before—the Judgment Bar of God! Oh, it is a terrible—a terrible thought! Can there be a hell? Can there be more hell than I suffer—now? I would give anything to—atone for the past! Oh, God, have mercy!"

His agony was terrible to witness, and some of the throng turned away; others compressed their lips and looked sternly on, well-knowing he was but reaping the bitter harvest he had sown. He turned on his face and dug his fingers into the earth, his whole frame shaking with horror—the horror that comes to a sinful man at death.

Suddenly he started up, his eyes staring, his

face ghastly. With one trembling hand he pointed at some imaginary vision that floated before his eyes, while he shrieked:

"See! see! They have come to taunt me! Look at their eyes—their gleaming, fiery eyes! They burn into my soul—they fill my heart with anguish! See them laugh and jeer! They are my victims! I killed them all! They are beckoning to me—they stretch out their arms! Oh, the horror of it! Keep off! keep off!"

With that shriek he rose bolt upright, his hands extended as if to repel some horrible thing.

"They are coming! They will drag me down—down! Oh, I can not die—I can not die! I—Ah!"

He fell headlong to the ground and lay dead at their feet!

The career of Red Hand, the Marauder, was over!

CHAPTER XL.

THE GREATEST JOY OF ALL.

"We're 'most thar, daddy!"

"Yes, leetle 'un; in er few minutes we'll see ther ole cabin."

The speakers were Kate Horn and her father, and the time five days after the death of Red Hand. The party had reached Silver in safety, and, after resting a spell, had started for old Zeb's former home. In all they were Old True Blue, Hal, Mat, Zeb and the two girls Kate and Silver Tongue.

The Ute maiden was alone in the world, for Red Hand's bullet had ended Soft Foot's life. The brave and noble-hearted Indian only lived a few minutes after the outlaw expired, but the brief time was spent in chanting a victor's song above the body of his slayer. He was buried near where he fell, and Kate helped the weeping Silver Tongue to strew his grave with flowers.

"Somehow I feel powerful strange, daddy!" exclaimed the girl.

"An' me too, Katie. I feel all jumpy hyer," placing his hand over the region of his heart.

They rode more swiftly through the pass, and in a few seconds they came abruptly into the pocket where they could see the cabin.

There they drew rein in surprise, for the door of the hut was standing wide open and a curl of smoke was rising lazily from the big chimney!

What did it mean?

For some moments both were too amazed to speak.

"Looks like some galoot's taken possession," observed Zeb, at length. "Let's ride forrard an' see."

Kate tried to speak, but no sound came from her lips. She was shaking all over her slender body as if with a great fear or excitement.

They rode forward till they were near the door.

Suddenly a figure appeared in the doorway—the figure of a woman!

"Mommy! mommy!"

With a shriek of joy, little Kate sprung from her horse and rushed forward to be clasped tightly in her own living mother's arms!

It seemed as if the woman had risen from the dead, but her story was very simple.

After the departure of Red Hand and his men, carrying Kate with them, she had become conscious to find herself lying on the floor, wounded and bleeding. At first she had reason enough to wish to dress her wounds, but she was too weak to rise, so she dragged herself to the door, thus making the bloody trail that had filled Zeb with horror when his eyes rested on it.

Outside the cool air had revived her and given her strength, but she must have become deranged, for she only remembered of wandering, wandering on and on. Then came a blank period.

When she revived she found herself in the cavern of an old Indian woman known as the Witch of the Diablo Range. This old woman had found her near by and had managed to get her to the cave. There, with roots and herbs, the Witch doctored her white patient, and, as the wound was not very dangerous, although it had caused a large loss of blood, she soon had Mrs. Horn on her feet again.

That very day the woman had returned to her cabin home, only to find it deserted. However, she had remained there, and her husband and child had returned to her without delay.

There was joy in the old fortune-finder's cabin home that night. Among them all the only one whose face showed a trace of sadness was Silver Tongue.

Zeb Horn and Old True Blue actually hugged themselves and capered with boyish delight. They shook hands and patted each other on the back at least twenty times, their eyes shining with the delight their tongues were unable to express.

"Great gosh all hemlock!" spluttered the Trusty. "This is ther greatest day of all my life! I feel so 'tarnal all-fired funny I jest don't know what ter do with myself! I want ter larf an' I want ter cry both at ther same time, an' it jest sends every blessed muskil of my body trimblin' with delight! Holy smoke! what a reunion jubilee this am!"

Then he went round to his boy and clasped the young man in his strong arms.

"Don't think yer ole father too foolish, Jackie boy, fer he jest can't help it! He's b'ilin' over, an' he must let off steam—ur bu'st!"

Maverick Mat, whose true name was Matthew Miles, saw how sad the Indian maiden looked, and he longed for a chance to speak with her alone. The chance came, for after a time she slipped quietly out at the door.

Mat followed.

Just around a corner of the cabin the Ute maiden halted, and pressing her hands to her breast, she began to sob. In a moment Mat was at her side.

"Forgive me for following you!" he entreated; "but I saw you looking so sad!"

She started away, with a convulsive catching of the breath, but he took her hand, speaking reassuringly:

"I have something to say to you, Silver Tongue."

He felt a thrill run down to the very tips of her fingers.

"To me?" she whispered, and her large eyes were turned in an inquiring, frightened manner upon him.

"Yes, to you, Silver Tongue."

Her head was bowed and she made no effort to break from his detaining clasp. With sudden, but gentle boldness, he passed his arm around her waist and bent his head till his lips were close to her ear.

"Silver Tongue, I love you!"

He felt her start and tremble, but she did not speak nor try to leave him.

"You are alone in the world now," he went on. "Let me become your protector."

Then she started away, despite his efforts to keep her from doing so, and her dark eyes were turned reproachfully on him.

"No!" she said, putting out one hand—"no, not that! Never, never!"

"Silver Tongue, you are not angry—"

"No, she said, sadly, 'not angry. If I were white, I might be; but I could expect you to ask no more. There is red blood in my veins—I am an Indian! I cannot expect a white man to ask me to become his wife!'"

"But there is white blood in your veins as well as red. Soft Foot told me that when he was dying. He said your mother was an educated white woman who was captured by his people. He saved her from them, and thus became an outcast. But she married him. There is good white blood in your veins, Silver Tongue!"

For a moment a gleam of hope showed in her eyes, but it quickly vanished, and she said, slowly:

"The Indian taint is there just the same. No pale-face will want me for his wife—"

"You are wrong, Silver Tongue—I want you for my wife!"

For an instant she seemed stunned with surprise, then she sprung forward and caught his hand.

"Do you mean it? Are you honest?" she cried, wildly. "Would you take me to your heart and confess me to the world? No, no, no! It cannot be!"

For reply he drew her to him and kissed her ere she fathomed his intention.

"I swear it!" he said, solemnly. "You shall become my wife, Silver Tongue!"

At the same moment Jack Ballou was pressing his suit with Kate.

"But ye can't mean it!" she panted, struggling to free herself from his arms. "Ye don't really want me fer yer wife?"

"But I do, little one!" he firmly replied, refusing to let her go.

"Oh, I'm so ignerent! Ye can't mean it! You'll be sorry bime-by an' wisht ye'd never sot eyes on me!"

"Never, Katie!"

"But I'm 'feared ye will!"

"Will you not trust my word, little one? I want you to become my wife. Will you marry me?"

"Ye must guv me time!" she panted.

"All right—a minute. You shall not leave my arms till you have consented to marry me!"

She hid her blushing face, but he pulled her hands away and kissed her.

"That is what you will have to endure till you consent to become my wife," he asserted.

"Will you marry me, Katie?"

"Wal, ef I must, I s'pose—I must."

"Then you promise?"

"Y-e-e-s."

The story is told.

Boss Brule disappeared after being wounded while attempting to escape from the custody of Lieutenant Cranston and his men, and the ruffian was never afterward seen in Silver City.

Cranston did not win the prize he coveted, pretty Kate Horn.

The mystery of the skeleton which Zeb Horn buried as the bones of his own wife was never revealed. It was probably that of some victim of Geronimo's raid.

The result of the Apache uprising is a matter of history.

THE END.

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